Everyday Life in Southeast Asia

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Living in Indonesia without a Please or Thanks: Cultural Translations of Reciprocity and Respect

Lorraine V. Aragon

"Can I take a sip of your drink, Dad?" I recently heard a seven-year-old American girl ask in a public waiting room.

"Yes, but you didn't say 'Please,'" her father chided gently.

"Please... Thanks!" The little girl chanted these two magic words in quick succession as she eagerly reached for her father's can of soda pop.

It is easy to watch these remarkably powerful words being taught to young children in any home or public arena in the United States. Those of us who speak English or other European languages generally take these words for granted. But we know that their deployment brings politeness, persuasiveness, and permission to what might otherwise be unacceptable requests.

The power of these words also can be made visible by their absence. Try living a day in the company of others without ever saying "please" or "thank you," and see what happens. Social psychology experiments devised in the 1970s tested the boundaries of U.S. social norms through their intentional violation. Those studies, briefly in vogue, were termed ethnomethodology. The experiments were easy to design once the formula of nonchalant rule violation was conceived, but their popularity among psychologists and sociologists was short-lived because of the ill will they produced. Similar discomfort often arises when we travel innocently to distant places where customary rules of politeness differ. Even with our best efforts, our attempts to translate our own polite forms often seem to fall awkwardly flat.

That said, it may seem unimaginable that societies in Indonesia, a region known for its intricate forms of politeness, would lack such basic terms as please and thank you to call the wheels of harmonious social interaction. As the anthropologists Clifford Geertz (1976) and James Peacock (1987) describe, the language, cosmology, politics, and aesthetics of Indonesia's most populous ethnic group, the Javanese, revolve around a dualism that contrasts the refined (alus, Javanese; halus, Indonesian) with the coarse or crude (kasar, Javanese and Indonesian).

We therefore would expect verbal expressions of gratitude to be prominent among peoples who are anxious about proper speech and social refinement. But, in fact, most of the more than three hundred indigenous languages spoken in the Indonesian archipelago do not include synonyms for terms such as please and thank you. Most languages in Indonesia borrow some "thank you" phrase from European languages or the national language, termed bahasa Indonesia, to cope with contemporary cosmopolitan expectations. When local people speak to one another in their native tongue, by contrast, they can make do without these phrases.

So, the cross-cultural puzzle arises: How does one live smoothly and politely in a society without a generic word like please to make your demanding requests upon others tolerable, and no phrases like thank you to express gratitude for help and kindness? Is gratitude simply assumed in small Southeast Asian communities of equals? Are the messages our European words contain perhaps encoded alternatively in nonverbal gestures?

The answers are more complicated. We must think in unfamiliar ways about what these kinds of words actually do—or, sometimes, cannot do—for us and others. Ward Keeler (1984:xvii) notes that "a critical part of learning a language is to learn not to want or need to say what one says in English, but rather to learn to say what people say in the culture of the language one is learning." In essence, then, studying a region's language in situ is much more about learning to intuit the logic of meaningful local categories and patterns of social expectations than it is about memorizing one-to-one linguistic translations. We are informed not only about technical language usage and conversational routines, but also about widespread Southeast Asian cultural practices of economic exchange and hierarchy. Keeler writes that Java is full of small talk, and polite conversation draws on a large store of stereotypical remarks. To use them is not thought stultifying, as some Westerners find, but rather gracious, comfortable, indicative of the desire to make every encounter smooth and effortless for all concerned. (Ibid.)

Given these concerns, it has surprised many observers that Indonesians, including the notoriously manners-obsessed Javanese, make little use, or very different use, of the kinds of terms we take as the mainstay of our polite interactions in most European languages. In what follows, I will show that the English term please is a rather diffuse word, one that maps onto many different kinds of requests in Indonesian languages. And, thank you has implications about intimacy and economy in Indonesia that we would never imagine. Before exploring these linguistic avenues, though, we should con-
consider what the Indonesian language is, and how it came to be the youthful nation's twentieth-century communication highway.

**INDONESIAN NATIONAL AND LOCAL LANGUAGES**

Most languages spoken in Indonesia fall into the Austronesian language family, comprised of more than one thousand languages. The result of maritime migrations starting roughly five thousand years ago, Austronesian languages span a vast reach across the Pacific Ocean from Madagascar in the west to Hawaii in the east. Only twenty-five of those Austronesian languages—Indonesian being one—have more than one million native speakers (Sneddon 2003:25).¹

The current geopolitical boundaries of Indonesia, like those of many former European colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, essentially were created by colonial conquests between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. What is now Indonesia was ruled by the Dutch as the Netherlands East Indies. The adjacent nation of Malaysia was ruled by the English as the British East Indies. These were boundaries on a political power grid, not natural ethnic divisions.

In 1928, Malay was selected to become the national language of the Dutch East Indies by a youth congress of pro-Independence nationalists. Indonesian is essentially a dialect of Malay. Thus the national languages of Malaysia and Indonesia are, for the most part, mutually intelligible. A quick glance at a map of Southeast Asia shows that the westernmost Indonesian island of Sumatra, especially the Riau area, is separated from the Malay Peninsula by just a narrow strait. Parts of Sumatra are much closer ethnically and linguistically to western Malaysia than they are to many of Indonesia's eastern islands such as Sulawesi, Maluku, Timor, or New Guinea. These latter islands, by contrast, are closer in linguistic, genealogical, and geographical features to the Philippines, or to the Pacific island region called Melanesia.

Although only about 5 percent of the Netherlands East Indies population spoke Malay in the 1920s, it was selected to be Indonesia's national language for political and social reasons (Sneddon 2003). While Dutch was used by the educated elite, it also was the language of the colonial oppressor and did not offer the international advantages of more widely dispersed European languages such as English or Spanish. Javanese was spoken by the largest population of Indies residents, roughly 40 percent, but this seemingly obvious choice was rejected. Nationalists were interested in a language that would unite an ethnically plural nation, and the Javanese were feared to be too dominant. Even most Javanese leaders found their language unsuitable for national status because of its dauntingly hierarchical character. Javanese often is considered the purest example of a language in which the relative status of the speaker and the listener is encoded within the vocabulary of different speech levels. Every word in some sentences must vary according to the relative status of the speakers (Geertz 1976; Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo 1982). Such complexity and feudal leanings were not considered promising for the national language of a modern, twentieth-century nation of equals.

By contrast, Malay had been used as a trade language along island Southeast Asian maritime routes, spread for centuries, first by seafaring merchants and later by the Dutch colonial administration. Thus, Malay's rudimentary conversational forms—greetings, travel or market bargaining, family-life questions, and the like—already served as a basic lingua franca in coastal regions of colonial Southeast Asia. Finally, Malay seemed the best choice for the new nation's governmental and educational purposes because it had been transcribed in the Latin alphabet and increasingly was adopted by popular journalists and literary writers (Anderson 1991).

In much of Indonesia, however, children still grow up speaking regional languages, most of which are significantly different in grammar and vocabulary from Indonesian. Indonesian is thus a second language learned in primary school and through exposure to the mass media. That was the situation in highland Central Sulawesi, where I conducted anthropological fieldwork first from 1986 to 1989. My academic preparation for fieldwork was to study Indonesian, but I needed to learn a very different local language when I settled in Sulawesi.

Another quick glance at a map will show why Sulawesi languages are closer to Philippine languages than they are to Malay. The Central Sulawesi language spoken where I lived is technically known as Uma, named by colonial European missionaries after the word for no, which varies throughout the island. The language also sometimes is called Pipikoro (meaning "banks of the Lariang River") or, more broadly, a Kulawi District language. Uma is an unwritten language spoken by an estimated 17,000–20,000 speakers. The Pipikoro dialect was studied thoroughly by a linguist translating the Bible (Martens 1988), but no study guides existed when I went there. So, after I arrived in the Tobaku highlands, I composed lists of words and sentences, which I initially asked Tobaku people to explain to me in Indonesian. My aim was to use Indonesian as little as possible as quickly as possible.²

Numerous Tobaku people told me that the two things they most appreciated about me as a visitor was that I could eat their local food and that I spoke (or tried to speak) their language. For me, partaking of the local cuisine, even at its most challenging, was by far the easier of those two enterprises. Being human, I was frequently hungry. In truth, I was thankful that eating required no special talent or hard-learned skills. By contrast, mastering a mostly unwritten language that differed grammatically from any language I had previously studied was exponentially more daunting.

Most Indonesian government and church mission visitors arriving in the highlands from the provincial capital expected to be fed large portions of specially cooked meats—no pork if they were Muslims, and different, gener-
ally less spicy, cuisine if they were Christians. By contrast, I was a grateful and “unfussy” guest with a strong stomach for the highlanders’ mounded plates of hill rice with side dishes of hot chilies and seasonal vegetables. While their cuisine and language seem to embarrass Tobaku people, they also serve as points of local pride. Just as U.S. travelers often expect everyone else in the world to learn English, most Indonesians visiting the Sulawesi highlands expect residents to speak Indonesian. In the 1980s, Tobaku people always spoke to each other in Uma, even if they knew Indonesian fluently and their guests did not. Their language was a source of local ethnic identity, a litmus test of responsible membership and moral knowledge that few outsiders could ever pass.

Tobaku people jokingly call their language basa mata’, which literally translates as the “green,” “unripe,” or “raw” language. With this phrase they imply that their language is unrefined (kasar, Indonesian) and not as sophisticated as Javanese or Indonesian languages. But the lack of a “please” or “thank you” in Uma is not the result of its rural speakers’ self-conscious coarseness or lack of educational refinement. Nor, as it turns out, is the absence of these words just a local linguistic or cultural phenomenon.

MAP THE MANY INDONESIAN WORDS FOR PLEASE

Learning to say please, even in the Indonesian national language, turns out to be much less straightforward than one might imagine. Translating please from English (or other European languages) into Indonesian can only be done indirectly because our one word please, and its other European equivalents such as s’il vous plaît (‘if you please,” French) map onto several Indonesian words that are deployed differentially in specific contexts.

Indonesian please terms can be divided roughly into request or invitation categories. Indonesian speakers use the word tolong, which literally means “help,” when making a request, such as “please help by doing X.” Thus Indonesians can say, Tolong bawa piring, meaning “Help [the listener or others besides the speaker] by bringing the plate,” or Tolong bawakan piring, meaning, “Help [me] by bringing the plate.” A somewhat more submitive request or supplication would use the word minta, which means “ask for,” or, alternately, mohon, (a very polite synonym for minta, used in more formal contexts). Thus, Minta piring, meaning “Asking for the plate,” would be another way to translate the English phrase, “Please bring the plate.”

Other Indonesian words that map onto our uses for please include mari, which is an invitation word meaning “please, I invite you to do X,” or silakan/ silahkan, which is a polite or more formal synonym for mari. A casual Javanese synonym for mari, widely known and used nationally, is ayo. Thus Indonesians can say mari makan, ayo makan, or silahkan makan, all meaning “Please eat,” but with the last phrase being the most formal and polite. All these phrases, which express “help me,” “I ask for,” or “go ahead and do X,” usually are matched with appropriate honorific or kinship terms of address such as Bapak (“Father” or “Sir”) or Ibu (“Mother” or “Madam”) to show additional respect for one’s elders.

Each form of Indonesian request or invitation entails a matching grammatical mood, including the imperative, interrogative, and affirmative. One Javanese expert’s list of English versus Indonesian “please” forms follows, with the Indonesian “please” equivalent set in bold:

1. “Please pass the salt” (Tolong ambilkan garam, request/imperative)
2. “Please come in” (Silahkan masuk or Mari masuk, invitation/imperative)
3. “Could you please tell me where she lives?” (Maukah anda memberitahu saya di mana dia tinggal? request/interrogative)
4. “Will you please shut the door?” (Tolong tutup pintunya, request/interrogative but less formal and polite)
5. “Yes, please” (Iya terima kasih, acceptance/affirmative)
6. “Third floor, please” (Tolong lantai ketiga, request/affirmative)
7. “Please . . .” (Saya mohon . . . or Tolonglah saya . . ., elliptic request or begging/imperative)

Clearly, many of these Indonesian terms work rather differently than our generic word, please. The Indonesian phrasings make it more explicit than the English equivalents, whether the speaker is asking for assistance or compliance. Indonesian also is clearer than English about specifying whether what is being requested is considered to be for the speaker’s, the listener’s, or a third party’s benefit. Requests generally designate either an elder or superior’s rightful demand or a social inferior’s more humbling request. In the latter case, extra elements may be added, such as honorific titles of address, or the suffix -lah after the verb, which softens any request. Paralanguage, such as tone of voice, relative height of body positioning, or eye direction, also are involved in what we might call Indonesian requirements for sensitivity to hierarchical positioning in communication.

The differential deployment of terms to connotate respect makes Indonesian a deceptively difficult language for many foreigners to master. Because Indonesian (or Malay) lacks several of European languages’ most complicated features (such as verb tenses, gendered words, and consonant clusters), it is often described as an easy language to learn. In terms of very basic sentence construction or “survival proficiency,” this is accurate, and those who study Indonesian are well supported by the kind tolerance of Indonesians toward non-native speakers, who may be complimented as fluent after uttering just a few introductory sentences. But less-familiar linguistic features such as semantically generative verb forms and hierarchical or formal registers ensure that advanced study of Indonesian languages presents unexpectedly complex challenges.
BEING ASKED FOR THE CLOTHES OFF MY BACK

In highland Central Sulawesi, I frequently found myself being asked for my possessions with a “please-type” word. The Uma language synonym for minta is merapi, and I heard this term used often in my first three years of fieldwork. During visits to many villages, I was asked to leave what Indonesians call a tanda mata, a phrase that literally means “sign for the eye” but is better translated as a visual sign or souvenir. I was well aware that I was indebted to both Tobaku individuals and communities for hosting me for days or weeks at a time during my fieldwork, and I did make a conscientious effort to compensate households where I resided with locally appropriate gifts. But, sometimes, young people I hardly knew, as well as older individuals I knew better, asked me for personal possessions or items of clothing before I departed their village. I initially tried to cope with these requests by bringing extra new clothes as gifts for my hosts, but the requests for my used garments continued unabated. One day the requests reached a point where I began to think I was destined to depart the island naked.

My concern over these pleas continued until one of my closest friends, Tina Eva, a Tobaku woman who had migrated in her youth to the provincial capital, exhibited her strategy for coping with what I then discovered was not special treatment reserved for foreigners. When we arrived in the highlands after a three-day hike, we presented our hosts—Tina Eva’s parents and extended family—with numerous gifts of city supplies, packaged food, and new clothes. We spent a convivial two weeks in the highlands and then prepared for our departure, receiving bundles of local produce to take back with us to the city.

I then was disarmed when Tina Eva’s sisters, nieces, and cousins began to request the clothes she had been wearing during our visit. Without missing a beat, Tina Eva cheerfully began unpacking the requested skirts, blouses, and slacks—all but the outfits she needed for our three-day journey home. I followed suit, so to speak. Tina Eva’s family was delighted. On the way home, Tina Eva revealed that this had been her plan all along. She had saved up what she considered her least-flattering outfits and deliberately worn them during our visit for her family members to see. Then her family helped her unload this sartorial baggage just before her return hike through the mountains. Her generosity created more room in her backpack for the gifts of fresh produce her farming relatives sent home for her family. It was a win-win game.6

But why, I still wondered, did local people want, even seem to prefer, our “fragrant” used clothes, rather than the brand new ones? Tobaku friends later explained that they preferred the clothes we had worn when visiting their villages because these items indeed were “signs of the eye,” linked in their collective visual memory of our visit. Clothes worn by honored guests and family are considered to hold some essence of the wearer. There is a

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meaningful social history there, analogous to how we might treasure our grandfather’s watch or our grandmother’s lace shawl. I gradually became used to hearing the “please give me your shirt” requests, and rather than thinking that these needy people were begging for hand-me-downs, I realized instead that they were establishing a material memory of our relationship, showing their affection, and also helping me, in a small way, to mitigate my continuing obligations as a long-term visitor and adopted relation in their communities.

SPEAKING ABOUT FAMILY, AGE, AND GENDER

In all Indonesian languages, social hierarchy becomes quickly displayed by a deft combination of word selection, honorifics, terms of address, and general tone of voice. In the Tobaku highlands, adults most often are addressed by their “teknonyms”—kinship titles in the form of “mother of X,” “husband of Y,” or “grandparent of Z”—rather than by any given personal or family name. As a Tobaku person goes through life, her or his name changes from a generic term for “female/male child,” to a childlike personal nickname, to “wife/husband of X,” to “mother/father of Y,” to “grandparent of Z.” Outsiders find this naming system impressively confusing, but local community members have little trouble keeping track. Knowing these changing monikers is simply part of knowing a consociate’s life story, and people love to talk about family relations. Throughout Indonesia, kinship titles are used not only for relatives, but also for new acquaintances one wishes to respect or humor. Bus drivers often are called Om, meaning “Uncle,” a strategy that reminds the driver that you respect his position of authority, and also that you expect him to care for your well-being on the journey as if you were cherished kin.

Indonesian terms denoting hierarchy emerge through contextual interactions. Early in my fieldwork, I met with a young professional Indonesian woman who worked at a university office in Central Sulawesi’s district capital. Before we had completed two minutes of opening chit-chat, the woman inquired about my age. I found this a striking question, especially since we appeared to me to be roughly the same age. The woman explained patiently that, in Indonesia, we needed to know each other’s exact age in order to establish which one of us would be addressed as “older sibling” (kakak) and which one as “younger sibling” (adik). This practice contrasts sharply with U.S. conventions where, as my son’s fourth-grade teacher advised, “The three questions you should never ask a woman are her age, her weight, and her natural hair color.”

Note that the Indonesian terms kakak and adik are gender neutral, applying to elder/younger sisters or brothers. In this respect, the Indonesian language suggests that age ranking is more critical for organizing Indonesian
social relations than gender ranking, which indeed generally proves to be the case. One’s age always must be known in Indonesia to enable elders to act beneficently and parentally toward their juniors, and juniors to act helpfully and respectfully to their elders. Similarly, visitors to Indonesia can expect to be asked quickly about their work roles, marital status, and children because bosses, spouses, and parents—who bear more responsibility—warrant more respectful language use. The concepts and family terms wielded (mother, father, aunt, uncle, grandparent, etc.) ideally allow Indonesians to recreate the familiarity, caring, and protectiveness of families beyond the household into the public sphere.

This extended deployment of kinship metaphors also affects national politics. Indonesian citizens called their first two presidents “father” (bapak; also, “mister” or “sir”) for twenty and thirty-two years respectively. In response, first President Sukarno and second President Suharto called Indonesian citizens their “children” (anak). These linguistic practices at times instill a cozy family solidarity to Indonesian politics, but they also sometimes aid the surrender of political authority to some less-deserving father figures, who reciprocate with patronizing paternalism (Shiraishi 1997).

WHEN A VERBAL EXPRESSION OF THANKS JUST WON’T DO

Initially, it seems more straightforward for an English speaker to translate the phrase thank you with the Indonesian synonym (terima kasih) than to learn all the different ways that Indonesians say please. Terima kasih literally means “receive love,” which allows the speaker to verbally declare the receipt of a kindness or gift from someone else. Many of the hundreds of indigenous languages in Indonesia, however, do not have such a phrase, so they often borrow the Indonesian expression. Central Sulawesi highlanders repurpose the Indonesian “receive love” phrase as terima kase. Similar borrowings are found in the languages of other outer island Indonesian groups: terim kasih (Mandailing, Sumatra); tarimo kase (Angkola, Sumatra); terimong gemusah (Aceh, Sumatra). The list goes on and on.

In Dutch-influenced regions such as Ambon and North Sulawesi, people rephrase the informal Dutch Denk je (“Thank you”) as danke. Similarly, in the former Portuguese (and later, Indonesian) colony of East Timor (now an independent nation), Portuguese words for obrigado are used (obrigado for men and obrigada for women). This idea of expressing one’s sense of obligation brings us closer to answering the puzzle of what is going on in the vast majority of Indonesian places where “thank you” has no synonym. In those regions, local people respond to kindnesses by expressing their positive emotions as raw appreciation rather than using a boilerplate catchphrase of verbal gratitude. Like the Toba people of North Sumatra who say mauliate (literally, “feeling good in my heart”), Uma speakers often simply say “I am happy” (Goe’ ama) after receiving a gift. Sometimes they add a phrase that translates “but one of my arms is long,” implying that they are receiving at that moment but not reciprocating. Sometimes they further engage in self-deprecation, asking for pity because they have nothing to give in return, even when they clearly do, or even just did! Essentially, their words explicitly mark the asymmetrical state of being a receiver, who exists with a future obligation to the giver.

In my study of Tobaku indigenous cosmology and Protestant revisions, I noted how foreign missionaries and church leaders frequently reminded highlanders to say please and thanks to God in their prayers for their health, crops, meals, and all life’s blessings. By contrast, before Christian conversion, the Tobaku made oaths of request directly to their deities, oaths that promised offerings in return for those same benefits of life. Although the new please and thank you words were added dutifully as verbal ornaments, I suggest that “Tobaku prayers still wrap these recent and inherently empty words around the material solidarity of sacrificial offerings to instill efficacy” (Aragon 2000:248). Essentially, in the hierarchical or ritual relations among humans, and between humans and deities, words do not exist apart from material goods and deeds in constituting “signs of recognition” (Keane 1997).

Ward Keeler (1984:109) illuminates an interesting Javanese twist on the issue by describing a Javanese term, matur nuwun (“saying thank you”; hatur nuhun in Sundanese), that traditionally was appropriate only for superiors, and during formal situations. The term had been perceived as unsuitable for social inferiors and even hurtful in personal encounters. Keeler writes that a speaker at a large ritual gathering will repeat the phrase “ceaselessly.” But, traditionally, a superior does not use phrases at this formal and humbling Javanese speech level (krama andhap) while addressing an inferior. More significantly, Keeler suggests that rather than strengthening a bond of friendship, the use of the “thank you” phrase matur nuwun in response to an act of kindness “short-circuits” the good feeling that gifts or kindnesses are intended to promote. Keeler writes:

If one says “matur nuwun” to a friend, it implies both distance and a denial of reciprocity—and one can watch his or her face fall as a result. It is telling that people do often say “matur nuwun” when . . . money changes hands, since monetary payment is also a cancellation of further implications of debt and exchange. (Ibid., 109)

Keeler astutely notes here how “thank you” words seem to cancel, or deny the promise of, future reciprocation for a gift.

When writing the acknowledgments section of my first book, I struggled for a way to avoid Indonesian words, to use local Uma terms to express my gratitude and sense of obligation for all the help I received from Central
Sulawesi people. I wrote, “Lentora rahi kai ompi’ ompi’ omea dipo tahi,” or, “I greatly miss all my siblings across the sea.” That was the best I could do to say “thank you” in Uma to an indigenous people who have no local words for this expression.

George Aditjondro (2007), an Indonesian social scientist who has worked in both northern Sumatra and Central Sulawesi, notes that the absence of indigenous words for “thank you” in many areas of western and eastern Indonesia “has surprised many outsiders, Indonesians and westerners alike.” But, Aditjondro agrees that the “absence of the expression ‘thank you’ in so many ethnic languages in this archipelago does not mean that the speakers of those languages lack a sense of gratitude.” Aditjondro writes:

Different forms of gratitude are known and practiced by these peoples, different from the Western, or, for that matter, Indonesian forms of gratitude. Basically, material and non-material forms of gifts develop a sense of gratitude among the receivers of the gifts. Or, probably, a sense or feeling of indebtedness. Ulang budi (“a debt of character” or “a moral debt”) we say in Indonesian. Ulang na loob, in Tagalog in the Philippines.

One can only be relieved from this feeling once one has responded in kind or after providing a service to the person from whom one has received the material or non-material gifts. In other words, underlying the absence of words for “thank you” is the need to maintain reciprocity, or reciprocal ways of returning the favors we have received by providing services or goods needed by the initial givers of gifts.

Reciprocity, is the key word. This reciprocity is a form of exchange, prior to the Western or Malay way of trading, which maintains the internal relations within the ethno-linguistic groups, or between the ethno-linguistic groups. (Aditjondro 2007)

What Aditjondro refers to here is what anthropologists, following the economist Karl Polanyi (1944), call “delayed reciprocity,” a kind of noncommodified gift exchange process, whose worldwide variations were described and theorized in the 1920s by Marcel Mauss (1990). Aditjondro contrasts this kind of long-term reciprocity with capitalist trading (the “Western or Malay way”), which follows an alternative (and to us more familiar) “tit-for-tat” or “balanced reciprocity” exchange policy between people who have no necessary or long-term relationship once the exchange is transacted. Without a sense of mutual debt and obligation, there is not necessarily any future to a social relationship. When we hand our payment to the store cashier and she says “thank you,” our interaction is completed and our relationship closed.

As it turns out, the cross-cultural puzzle of why many Indonesian languages have no synonym for thank you is solved not by thinking about which alternate words or behaviors would be “good enough” to replace our own verbal expressions of gratitude. Rather, it is solved by recognizing that for people engaging in delayed forms of social and economic reciprocity, words themselves are not enough to balance deeds. Additionally, compensation must occur at a later date so that a period of indebtedness prolongs, and thereby strengthens, the relationship. Thus, at the moment when a first good deed is enacted, often the best thing the recipient can do is simply acknowledge pleasure and a state of asymmetry or obligation in the “gift-exchange” relationship. Both parties then may part with a sense of indebtedness and responsibility to nurture the relationship later.

Keeler (1987) notes that the Western custom of always saying “thank you” in response to any kindness seems to Indonesians to be rather jejun in the sense of being both unsatisfying and immature. I, too, try to explain this in my ethnography about the Tobaku region:

Debts of significance cannot be released with a few fluffy words floated for a moment in the air. Gifts require continuation of the exchange process, not its cessation through attempted compensation. Obligations are a state of being and a means to create relations anew. (Aragon 2000:vii)

Hence, when visiting Indonesia, feel free to express thanks, gratitude, and happiness for all the kindnesses Indonesian people undoubtedly will grant you. But be prepared for gifts to change your relationship, and to unleash expectations that you will make relationships continue through future, and sometimes unexpected, forms of reciprocity.

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Despite the irony of verbally thanking anyone after this essay, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the work of this volume’s editors and to mention the names of other scholars whose contributions have directly affected my thinking on this subject. I am grateful to Ward Keeler for contributing so much to Javanese linguistic issues; to Mohammad Thoyib for enlightening me further on contemporary Javanese and Indonesian usage; to George Aditjondro for documenting thank you and reciprocity terms across the archipelago; to Michael Martens for always graciously sharing his extensive knowledge of Uma; to Nancy Eberhardt for her insight on transforming status and wealth distribution through requests; and to Liz Coville, with whom I shared early conversations about experiences of minta in Sulawesi. Finally, again, I remember with happiness the many kind people I met in the Tobaku highlands (Goe’ ama’) and feel the absence of their good-natured companionship (Lentora rahi kai).

NOTES

1. Austronesian languages sometimes are termed “Malayo-Polynesian.”
2. At that time, no one in the region spoke English, so working through English was not an option.
3. The apostrophe at the end of many Uma words (for example, *mata* or "unripe") represents a glottal stop, as heard in the middle of Americans' common expression of chagrin, "oh-oh."

4. My thanks to Mohammad Thoiyibi of Universitas Muhammadiyah, Surakarta, for this list.

5. Showing respect in Indonesia entails keeping one's head physically lower than the heads of others, often a challenge for tall or ignorant foreign visitors. During the Southeast Asian monetary crisis that began in late 1997, a widely published newspaper photograph of an International Monetary Fund officer, who stood towering over the seated President Suharto as he signed a new loan-restructuring agreement, was considered a national disgrace, indicative of the aging president's growing political weakness in the international community, and hence at home.

6. As Nancy Eberhardt (2006:98–99) describes, this rural Southeast Asian pattern of cheekily requesting anything exceptional that anyone else visibly has allows people with "less stuff" to initiate a hierarchical personal relationship simply through the asking. This technique compels those daring to practice conspicuous consumption to be generous and caring in exchange for public prestige. The requirement of extreme magnanimity as the price for incrementally higher social status also acts as a leveling mechanism, pushing individuals toward egalitarianism (or at least minimal differences in material wealth) and other more spiritual or community-oriented forms of prestige-seeking.

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Toba Batak Selves: Personal, Spiritual, Collective

Andrew Causey

Who is "me"? For the Toba Batak of North Sumatra, Indonesia, probing that question might take a lifetime. My first experience with the complexity of a Toba Batak notion of self occurred when I was listening to my carving teacher's wife, Ito, talk about one of their sons, a young man who had serious learning difficulties and was who was recalcitrant and mischievous. Their son always played with children much younger than himself, or played by himself; he spent hours toying with kittens, often chatting with them. The other children liked him, but it was clear that he was unlike the others. When Ito spoke about him, she had a kindly and bemused tone, and once told me, "Yes, he is different, but we have to be careful because his spirit is very strong." I was not certain what she meant, so she gave me an example.

She told me that some years earlier he had repeatedly asked her for a red plastic toy car from the market. The only toys her eight children owned were homemade, constructed out of drinking straws or rubber bands, and Ito explained that the family could not afford such an extravagance, especially not for a young man who was too old for such things. He persisted, not begging or cajoling, but simply stating over and over that he wanted the toy car. She refused. He persisted. After a month of this, she told me, he fell out of a tree and broke his arm in such a way that required an expensive trip to a specialist. They had to ask her husband Partoho's sister to sell her only gold necklace and then they borrowed the money she received. "After that," Ito continued, "it was clear I had to buy the toy for him." Her husband Partoho nodded his head in agreement as she stated the conclusion to the story.

I did not understand the tale, and wondered if I had misunderstood something along the way. Perhaps sensing the confusion in my face, Partoho said, "That's the way it is! After that, we could see that in the days to come, we should not resist his will—we must give in to it. Such is the strength of his spirit." Still confused, I asked about the connection between the toy car and the son's fall. It seemed hard for either of them to clarify something so patently obvious, but they tried to find words to explain it. Ito said, "You