

The Haircut

I was growing tired of peering through my too-long fringe and startling every Indonesian I encountered with my jungled beard and wild, salt-puffed hair. So I entered the local general store and asked the old lady behind the counter if she knew where I could score a haircut. She reached for pen and paper. For a moment I thought she hadn't understood my lurching Bahasa Indonesian, until she handed me the paper. I read her scrawl: 'Jam duabelas, besok.' 'Uh ... terima kasih, Bu,' I replied, and walked out.

The next day I returned as instructed to find the store jam-packed with what seemed to be every member of the village. Squatting down at the front were the children who followed us to the surf each morning, now trying their hardest not to giggle. In the middle were various workers and farmers, a few women and a short policeman. At the back stood the most elderly - all men, all wearing the same lidless black caps and inscrutable expressions. They were arranged in curved rows, as if for a school photo. Yet there was no camera here. Rather, all these people had come for one reason only: to watch the foreigner have his hair cut. Sweat began to bead on my forehead.

A young lady cowered in the rear doorway. The old lady from the day before appeared and led her quietly but firmly to the centre of the shop. She grimaced at me and seemed to nod at the simple wooden chair before her. I assumed this was where I was meant to sit, and edged around the crowd to do so. The old lady pressed a huge pair of scissors into the young lady's hands and pushed her towards my chair. I looked up. Her dark eyes eluded mine, but her body language spoke fearful volumes.

Through my mind flashed visions of the Dutch, who only abandoned Indonesia because the Japanese left them no choice. Was I to be stabbed in the neck with those glinting scissors to pay for unpaid colonial crimes? Sacrificed, to the pre-Allah gods, in this bizarre hair dressing salon before this grim Islamic horde, my jugular gushing dark blood all over this pretty girl's best Hari Minggu dress?

The young hairdresser placed a towel around my shoulders and began combing out hair knots with a slender hand. She started slowly, but gained in confidence as the crowd began to ooh appreciatively at her control of both comb and flashing blades. One bold child in the front row discreetly began to scoop up fallen locks and even more discreetly pass them back while my appearance evolved from a semi-hippy state to Top Gun candidate material. The young lady even removed my beard with a cutthroat razor, despite my feeble protests.

Finally, she sighed and bowed, and was led away by the proud old woman. She had done a fine forty minutes' work. The crowd began to disperse, though a few lingered to shake my hand and nod that I was now a much improved person. We had all been through an experience that would not quickly fade from memory; and it had cost the villagers nothing for the show, and me the rough equivalent of 75 cents.