

THE COMMUNAL FEAST

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Jim was aroused from his preparation for teaching at the next day's Bible School by his wife, who reminded him that evening had almost come. With a start, he remembered the dilemma facing him, one that would require a decision within the hour. Would he accept his neighbor's invitation delivered earlier in the afternoon to attend the *slametan* feast just after dark?

Jim and Anne West had lived in a small rural Javanese town for over a year now. Before coming, they had learned to speak Indonesian with reasonable fluency and later had acquainted themselves with Javanese culture through observing and mixing with the people.

After moving to the town, Jim and his family did their best to integrate themselves into the local community. Jim established good relationships with the local officials—the civil administrator, the military commander, the police chief, and the locally elected town mayor. His ability to speak Javanese gained him immediate respect, and his position as chief pastor of several congregations also gave him status in the community.

Jim and Anne also found that having a family of three young children helped to establish relationships with their immediate neighbors. Soon after their arrival, they had followed the local custom of inviting all the neighbors to a housewarming so that they could formally introduce themselves. Thereafter they took every opportunity to chat over the fence and strengthen relationships in other ways. Living on church property, however, meant that non-Christians did not always feel free to visit them. Jim understood their hesitancy in what was a nominally Muslim society, but it made him feel as though there

was still a lack of complete acceptance on their part. Perhaps that was a situation that could never be overcome completely.

Jim's thoughts turned again to the invitation that had suddenly faced him with a difficult choice. When his neighbor's teenage son delivered the verbal invitation earlier, Jim's first reaction was one of excitement and joy, because this was a sign that his neighbors had really accepted him and regarded him as a part of the immediate community. There was no need for an immediate reply, for guests are expected to accept automatically unless they are unavoidably prevented from attending. The euphoria quickly passed, however, replaced by more sober reflections on the implications of accepting or rejecting the invitation.

Jim had learned about the *slametan* during his language studies and by talking with other missionaries and members of the church. It was a simple meal arranged by a household at various times in connection with significant events in life, such as the birth of a child, circumcision of a male son, marriage, death, the building of a new house, the departure for a long journey, illness, or success in some important venture. In this case, their neighbor's wife had just given birth to a baby, and a son at that.

But Jim knew that the *slametan* held far deeper significance than just an expression of joy for another son in the family. Basic to the feast is the ritual designed to give protection from evil spirits. Even though the Javanese are nominally Muslim, their day-to-day lives are still very much influenced by fear of spirits and witchcraft. After the invited male neighbors gather (the *slametan* proper is an all-male affair, although women often gather in the kitchen or another room) and are seated cross-legged on woven-leaf mats spread around the perimeter of the room, the host begins with an introduction and an explanation of the reason for the gathering. Incense is burned and specially prepared food placed on mats in the center of the room. Normally the food consists of rice and two or three side dishes. In the center is placed a cone of rice representing a mountain, which in Javanese belief is regarded as the source of well-being.

The food is not primarily for the guests. It and the incense are offerings to the spirits. Sometimes, in his opening speech, the host mentions the various spirits, which are thought to be particularly concerned with this occasion and for which the food is intended.

After the speech is over, someone is called upon to offer a prayer, which is in the form of a Muslim chant in Arabic. Sometimes the local *modin*, or Muslim official, is specially invited for this purpose. At other times the prayer is offered by anyone present who has learned the appropriate recitation. Its intent is protection against the harm that