



Teman utara kami*

Virginia Hooker is a Professor of Indonesian and Malay. Now retired, she spoke to Kylie Dominick about the language, life and culture of our northern neighbours.

FOLLOWING MY RETIREMENT in 2007, I was given the title of Emeritus Professor of the ANU and I have continued my research work along with supervising graduate students. I'm interested in how ordinary Indonesians express their feeling of being Muslim — some of them are

doing it through painting — that's what I'm working on at the moment. It has been my great good fortune to travel often to Indonesia and to supervise Indonesian graduate students. I have learned far more from them and from fellow scholars in Indonesia than I have ever taught them. Facilitating face-to-face interactions between Australians and Indonesians has been an ongoing obsession.

*Our northern friends

Indonesia's been in the news lately and is our closest, biggest neighbour and we don't always seem to get along.

There's some posturing among politicians on both sides. Australians sometimes feel anxious about Indonesia because we don't know a lot about the country — and I've spent my life trying to improve that. But Indonesians, unless they've had the good fortune to have a university education, don't always know where Australia is. They're not frightened, or even have any feelings about Australia because they don't know about us.

It's been interesting to see how the Australian press reports Indonesian events and Indonesian attitudes. Recently, the Indonesian Finance Minister, Dr Muhammad Chatib Basri, gave two public lectures at the ANU that were very well attended. There were a lot of journalists there, students and Canberra people who came to see what he had to say about Australia.

He said that yes, it's looking a bit strained at the moment between our two countries, but history has shown us that at a deeper level, life goes on between us, nothing is severely impaired.

He then proceeded to totally charm the audience within five minutes. My question to him was that, rather than differences, we have a lot in common, and did he agree we can use our similarities to find common solutions? And he did agree, but none of that was reported in the Australian press.

What can governments do, and what can people like you do?

Both governments try to do something, and that's how I got involved in one of the most satisfying parts of my professional life.

After 9/11, Islam in Australia was a very sensitive topic, because it was of course linked with terrorism. When I was appointed to the board of the Australia Indonesia Institute in about 2002, one of my briefs was to try to find ways to improve the understanding of Australians about Islam in Indonesia.

I devised an exchange programme to bring young Muslim leaders from Indonesia to see Australia first hand. The groups of young men and women we selected had face-to-face meetings with all sorts of Australians and went anywhere they were interested in. They loved it; and the Australians who met them loved them for their frankness and their willingness to try almost anything — even eating kangaroo.

The next step was to select young Australian Muslim leaders to go to Indonesia. Muslims in Australia are fewer than half a million, and Indonesian Muslims are a tiny proportion of that. We wanted Australian Muslims who were mainly Lebanese, Egyptian, Palestinian, Turkish, Sudanese and so on, to see what Islam is like in Indonesia. We chose youth leaders who were doing exceptional work in Australia, mainly from Melbourne and Sydney. We wanted them to see with their own eyes what Indonesian Islam is like. We got emails back saying, firstly, Indonesians are so friendly, and secondly, we didn't know Islam could be so moderate. They were surprised when the Indonesians took them to see a Hindu ballet performed in an ancient Hindu temple and that this was considered okay.

What is Islam?

Islam, the religion, is based on the Qur'an, which Muslims believe was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. Its language is beautiful and it describes the greatness and compassion of God with guidance for how to honour God (through praying five times a day, for example) as well as how to be a good member of society. The challenge for modern Muslims everywhere is how to adapt a 7th century religion revealed in Saudi Arabia to the challenges of modern life.

Why is there a link between Islam and dangerous fanaticism?

I think the fanaticism that has become linked to some Muslims might be because in the Qur'an there is quite an emphasis on rewards — there is in the Bible too. But whenever you get a literal slant on a religion it's dangerous, because the promise of a reward is taken literally, not metaphorically. The language of the Qur'an is very graphic in terms of what might happen if you do not follow its guidance. Equally, the descriptions of the rewards are graphic. If you took a literal slant on it you would make every effort to get to heaven and avoid the other place. Some unscrupulous religious leaders manipulate their followers through very literal interpretations of parts of the Qur'an.

Young men are especially vulnerable where there is poverty, high unemployment and other negative socio-cultural factors at play. It is easier to persuade a person to perform violent acts if they lack purpose, have no job and so not enough to do, and you've made them an offer that might

increase their status. If you are able to recite parts of the Qur'an your status goes up in any Muslim country. If I was able to recite more than I can, my status would go up too. For example, if they're sent for training to another country, such as Afghanistan or the southern Philippines, they come back quite macho because they look like they have religious learning and they can claim they've given their life to Allah.

Some people will protect them and hide them from the police, because there are other people who would report them to the police. So while Indonesia's Islam is overwhelmingly very moderate, there will be some who could go astray because of the circumstances they live in.

The terrorist incidents in Indonesia, and the influence of modern thinking, are helping to prevent religious fanaticism. But we need to remember Muslims can be reluctant to criticise other Muslims and if they do, it is often in private and not done openly. It is a fact that terrorists have killed more Indonesians than foreigners have, so most Indonesians are not keen to be killed by these loonies.

Is a relative lack of education in many Muslim countries part of the problem?

The questions about relative poverty and lack of education are of great interest to Muslims themselves. From about the 800s to the 1400s, the Muslim peoples had been very successful in warfare and were covering a lot of territory and discovering massive libraries of Greek texts on architecture, medicine, astronomy etc. They translated them into Arabic and began to implement what they'd learnt from the Greeks. So when Europe, with the Crusades and so on began to turn the tide, they took back these teachings which had been further developed by the Muslims and began to run with them.

So Muslims now are saying: why are we able to achieve so highly as individuals, but our countries are so far behind? An outsider like me might suggest that uneducated Muslims are very wary of change, fearing that adopting Western ideas and innovations might threaten the purity of Islam. It is challenging for modern-minded Muslims to convince the less

VIRGINIA AND BARRY HOOKER WITH IBU SINTA NURIYAH (SEATED) AN ACTIVE CAMPAIGNER FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN INDONESIA AND WIFE OF PRESIDENT ABDURRAHMAN WAHID.

