



A Land Without Haste

Indonesia is the second most relaxed country in the world, after Mexico. There, people believe time is not precise, but can be stretched as needed – a concept known as “rubber time.” Caroline Buijs spoke to three women in Yogyakarta, the cultural capital of Java, about life without a ticking clock.

“Time can go in all directions here in Indonesia”

Every culture has its own way of dealing with the phenomenon of time. For me, life is so often dictated by the clock: trains have to be caught, deadlines loom, children wait in the schoolyard, and food has to be on the table by dinner time.

Social psychologist Robert Levine studies how people all over the world experience time, and he’s discovered that Indonesia is second on the list of “most relaxed” countries, after Mexico.

In general, Indonesian life is far less ruled by the clock – except for in the capital, Jakarta. There is an Indonesian expression, *jam karet*, which literally means “rubber time.” It means that time is like a rubber band: you can stretch it in any direction, so you’ll never make an appointment for 3 p.m.

on the dot, for example. It could just as easily be 3:15 p.m. or 4 p.m. It’s a way of avoiding the pressure of time. Nobody blames you if you turn up late; time is elastic, indeed. It’s rude to expect someone to hurry for you. Social interaction (stopping for a chat here and there) is considered more important than being on time, and that’s often the reason why people come later than planned.

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"If my phone rings, I ask my daughter for permission to answer it"

I take the train to the charming university town of Yogyakarta. It doesn't go faster

than about 40 miles an hour – even the train is utterly relaxed – and women with children in their arms wave from the sides of the tracks. In Yogyakarta, I meet **Cisca Andriyani Budi Harga (36, married with two daughters)** who works in the travel section of the ViaVia travel café, which is famous among travelers. We chat about Cisca’s work while enjoying a cup of ginger tea.

Cisca grew up in the capital, Jakarta, but since her marriage in 2004, she has lived in Yogyakarta, a city of half a million inhabitants. “When I first moved here, I had culture shock,” she tells me. “Jakarta was always so busy. It always took a long time just to get to work, time that came at the expense of myself and my social life. Here, it’s completely different: everything is much, much slower. I used to wonder if something was wrong with me, in the beginning, but now I’m used to it and I find it great. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

HOME IS REALLY HOME

Cisca works six days a week from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., but her working hours are often flexible. If it’s busy, she sometimes works to 6 p.m., but on quiet days, she often goes home at 3 p.m.

“I miss many moments with my family because it’s quite a lot of work,” she tells me, “so when I get home, I really am at home. That means I’d rather not touch my cell phone. And if it rings, I ask my older daughter for permission first: “do you mind if I answer it?” Usually, she says yes. I think because she feels seen and heard, and understands that I want to show her consideration.”

Cisca doesn’t have a smartphone, and says she’d never want one. “Just holding such a thing completely sucks you in,” she



1. The local market in Yogyakarta
2. Indonesia’s most relaxed island: Gili Meno
3. Offerings in the Kraton, the palace of the Sultan
4. XXXXXXX XXXXXXX XXXXXXX XXXXXXX
5. Rickshaw ride through the streets of Yogyakarta

says. “I see that in my husband.” Because Cisca works six days a week – which is not unusual in Indonesia – Sundays are sacrosanct. “Recently, I told all my friends and my work that they shouldn’t call or text me on Sundays, unless it’s urgent.”

QUE SERA, SERA

Cisca also spends time with her extended family. “Although you’re married, in Indonesia you’re still part of your original family,” she says. “Individualism is not so important here. My mother often says: ‘You’re still my baby, even if you have one of your own.’ So long as she doesn’t tell me how to do things, it’s fine. That’s her way of showing her love. Moreover, my mother doesn’t interfere with my daughters’ upbringing. In Indonesia, many grandmothers like to sleep with their grandchildren in the same bed, but she doesn’t do that, deliberately. She really lets me have my own family.”

Cisca likes the laidback culture of Yogyakarta, but she’s got opinions about its downsides, too. “Sometimes it’s just too much ‘que sera, sera,’” she says. “Fortunately, more and more people have insurance, and they’re thinking more about the future of their children, for example: how can I ensure that later on I can pay for a good school for them?”

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"You don't plan leisure time, but use it spontaneously"

Rita Sri Suwantari (40, single)

works as a guide for tourists and an interpreter for anthropologists and journalists. In the off-season, she’s an English teacher. She arrives by motorbike to chat with me in the tropical garden of my hotel, to the soundtrack of chirping crickets.

“It always strikes me how much westerners like to plan things in advance,” says Rita, laughing. “Even on weekends and holidays. The tourists who come to Indonesia run from attraction to attraction.” Indonesians wouldn’t think of scheduling their time so strictly, she says. “You don’t plan leisure time, but use it spontaneously. I think we take more time out, at home, for doing nothing. That’s why I don’t keep an agenda and my friends don’t either, so our dates happen spontaneously and that feels nice.”

RATHER WAIT THAN RUSH

When I ask her about the phenomenon of “rubber time,” Rita explains that it only really applies to casual activities. She always arrives punctually for work. “I deal with western tourists, and I know that they appreciate being on time. With friends it’s

different – that’s when rubber time applies. And it’s different for each of my friends. I know who will come on time and who won’t. We’re flexible about it, and now our cell phones make it easier. Sure, dates get postponed, often because of the weather: it’s either raining too hard or it’s simply too hot.”

Rita finds it fascinating how some of her European friends go about catching a train: “They say, ‘just five more minutes, then we have to go!’ Everyone always looks up the online timetables. They print out a schedule for me and, just to be polite, I take it. But I never use it. I see when a train goes, and if I miss one, I’ll wait for the next. For me, that’s always better than having to rush.”

CLOSE TIES

Time for family is important in Indonesia, because family ties are close. Rita lives with her mother, which is quite normal here if you’re not married. “Western friends sometimes ask how I cope, living with my mother. I have no problem with it. Of course I get annoyed with her sometimes, but I’d rather suppress my annoyance than hurt her feelings. I’m careful not to disturb the balance between us. Besides, I’m often away from home for my work, and my mother understands that I have a life of my own. I have friends who also live with their mothers,





1. Cycling through the rice fields is Yetty's favorite pastime
2. In every region you find different types of prawn crackers, chili, and herbs
3. Tea pickers in Malabar, West Java

but have to be home at a specific time. Happily, I don't get that."

"I do everything slowly"

Yetty Aprilia (34, married with two children) runs a thriving wooden garden furniture business with her Flemish husband. Yetty has invited me to dinner at her home. I get there by *becak* (bike-taxi); the driver is snoozing under his umbrella until I tell him where I want to go, and then he springs into action. Yetty lives surrounded by rice fields in the north of Yogyakarta, in a beautiful home made of natural materials. Her place is actually three houses: one where she sleeps, one where she eats and reads, and one to receive guests or watch television.

"I do everything slowly," says Yetty. "At least, that's what my husband always says. But I'm happy. I like doing things slowly, and I believe that's typically Indonesian. I sometimes discuss it with Steven, my husband. Maybe it's because in the West you have four seasons and, historically, when it came to food, you had to plan in advance: sowing, harvesting, and storing enough food to make it through the winter. Here, we have only the dry season and the rainy season; the soil is always fertile.

We never worry about the harvest in Indonesia: any tree or plant will grow here and, in the worst case, you can always eat bananas. We can afford to be slower."

TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY

A few years ago, Yetty was not so laid back. "I worked full time, the children were always with the nanny, and I was demanding so much of myself," she says. "I was always in a hurry and constantly stressed. Eventually, I did a course in Vipassana – a form of meditation from India that is becoming very popular in Indonesia – and that gave more insight into how I was using my time. Subsequently, I decided to work part-time, and since then, I meditate almost daily. It gives me a lot of peace. I still have to work through my to-do lists – in that sense I believe I've been westernized – but if I don't finish everything in one day, I know that tomorrow is another day."

Yetty's favorite pastime is cycling through the rice fields, looking at the farmers sitting in their bamboo houses. Their working day finishes early because they often get up before dawn. Once a week, Yetty's family goes for takeout or fast food: instant noodles for example, or they fetch something from the *warung* (small eatery), because these things make for an easier life. "Because my husband is Belgian, I

learned that eating together is a social event," she says. "We didn't do that at home. My parents both worked hard to keep our heads above water, so in the mornings my mother prepared the meals for the whole day: vegetables, rice, soup, chicken, tofu. Food was always ready to eat and everyone in the family – I have two sisters and a brother – just ate when it suited him or her. I often ate alone."

SOCIAL CONTROL

Yetty also devotes a great deal of time to her family. Her parents are practicing Muslims and, although Yetty doesn't practice anymore, she remains Muslim. In Indonesia, not having a religion is not an option. Yetty would like to introduce her parents to Vipassana meditation, but she's finding it hard.

"They often experience life as a burden, so I think meditation would be good for them," she says. "The trouble is that they immediately associate meditation with Buddhism, and for them Buddhism is another religion. And that's sensitive. Also, my mother worries about what the neighbors would think if they knew she meditated, or what the family would say. Social control has a big impact here, too. But I'll keep trying." ●

TEXT AND PHOTOS CAROLINE BUIJS