

Forgotten People: Poverty, Risk and Social Security in Indonesia

The Case of the Madurese

Gerben Nooteboom



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Cover illustration: Brickmaking enterprise (*serobong*) of Madurese migrants in East Kalimantan (photo by author).

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Forgotten People: Poverty, Risk and Social Security in Indonesia

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Contents

Acknowledgements VII

List of Maps, Tables, Figures and Illustrations IX

1 Introduction 1

PART 1

East Java

2 A Baseline of Desire

Rural Livelihoods, Inequality and Social Mobility 45

3 Bonds of Protection; Structures of Exclusion

Social Security in East Java 92

4 Styles Matter

Coherent Diversity in Livelihood and Social Security 144

5 Risk Taking

Sex, Gambling and Power 171

PART 2

East Kalimantan

6 Badlands

Madurese Livelihoods in East Kalimantan 203

7 Experiences of Violence 233

8 Risk, Illegality and the State in Kalimantan 261

Conclusion: Forgotten people?

Poverty, Risk and Social Security in Indonesia 280

Bibliography 295

Index 312

List of Maps, Tables, Figures and Illustrations

Maps

- 1 Map of Indonesia. Research locations 3
- 2 Madurese speaking areas in Indonesia 30
- 3 Research location I: Krajan, a village in Bondowoso district, East Java 36
- 4 Research location II: East Kalimantan and Samarinda 40
- 5 Land use and brickmakers in Samarinda, East Kalimantan 221

Tables

- 1 Ownership of *sawah* and *tegal* per social class 76
- 2 Ownership and control of cattle per household 78
- 3 Number of months of self-sufficiency in food 81
- 4 Insecurities and sources of support 140
- 5 Value orientations and styles 160
- 6 Styles and orientations 161
- 7 Styles and social classes in Krajan 162

Figures

- 1 Wealth ranking and percentage of total population 66
- 2 Share of sawah ownership by wealth category 77

Illustrations

- 1 Rice harvest in Krajan 109
- 2 Widow with children and land 112
- 3 Widow without children 125
- 4 Brickmaking family from Bondowoso, East Java 199
- 5 Brickmaking family from Bangkalan, Madura 207
- 6 Brickmaking settlement in Balikpapan 209
- 7 Worker from East Java preparing clay for bricks 211
- 8 Carrying clay to the brick moulding place 214

- 9 Firing bricks in Samarinda Sebrang 215
- 10 Newly arrived migrants from Malang, East Java 230
- 11 Refugee from West Kalimantan working in brick kiln Samarinda 247
- 12 Madurese road worker loading gravel at brick kiln in Samarinda 252
- 13 Accommodation at one of the brick kilns of Air Hitam, Samarinda 255
- 14 Successful farmer from Malang 286

Introduction

In the last two decades, major changes have taken place in the livelihoods of Indonesian people. Some groups in society have experienced major improvements in living conditions, benefitting from steady economic growth of about 6.5% annually (Burke and Resosudarmo 2012:301), while other groups have missed the boat and face economic stagnation, social exclusion, political underrepresentation, dispossession of land and growing inequality (Alatas et al. 2012, Hall et al. 2011, McCarthy et al. 2012, Nooteboom 2008:43). This inequality is often based on class and ethnicity and includes spatial dimensions such as inequalities between cities and rural areas and between regions (Mishra et al. 2009, Suryadarma et al. 2006). A significant group of people who seem to have largely missed out in the new Indonesia are the Madurese¹ (Stenross 2011:27–29).

Although the national economy has almost doubled since 2000,² a large proportion of the Indonesian people still live in poverty and face daily difficulties in making ends meet. According to a 2012 World Bank Country Report: ‘Out of a population of 234 million, more than 32 million Indonesians currently live below the poverty line and approximately half of all households remain clustered around the national poverty line set at [a very low] 200,262 rupiahs per

1 Throughout this book, the term ‘Madurese’ simply refers to Madurese-speaking people. Among them, there are many differences regarding area of origin, self-identification and official representation. Madurese themselves make more refined qualifications regarding region of origin and language use, and their self-identification might differ from those imposed by outsiders. Madurese from Madura, for instance, do not always regard Madurese from mainland East Java as Madurese.

The Madurese originally came from the densely populated and resource-poor island of Madura. Since the 17th and 18th centuries Cribb 2000:33, 52, large groups of Madurese have moved to eastern parts of mainland Java (including Surabaya, Malang, Pasuruan, Sitobondo, Bondowoso and parts of Jember, Banyuwangi and Lumayang). See: Cribb 2000:52; Stenross 2011:24; Tennekens 1963:310. They also live on the Bawean and Kangean islands. Nowadays, they can be found in all the major cities of Indonesia and in rural West and Central Kalimantan Husson 1997a with major concentrations in Pontianak, Sambas and the large cities of East Kalimantan, Balikpapan and Samarinda.

2 The country’s gross national income per capita has steadily risen from \$2,200 in 2000 to \$3,720 in 2009, and it continues to grow at rates above 6 – 6.5% annually (www.worldbank.org country overview, accessed February 2013).

month (\$22).³ This poverty consists of 'old' patterns and 'new' forms of poverty.

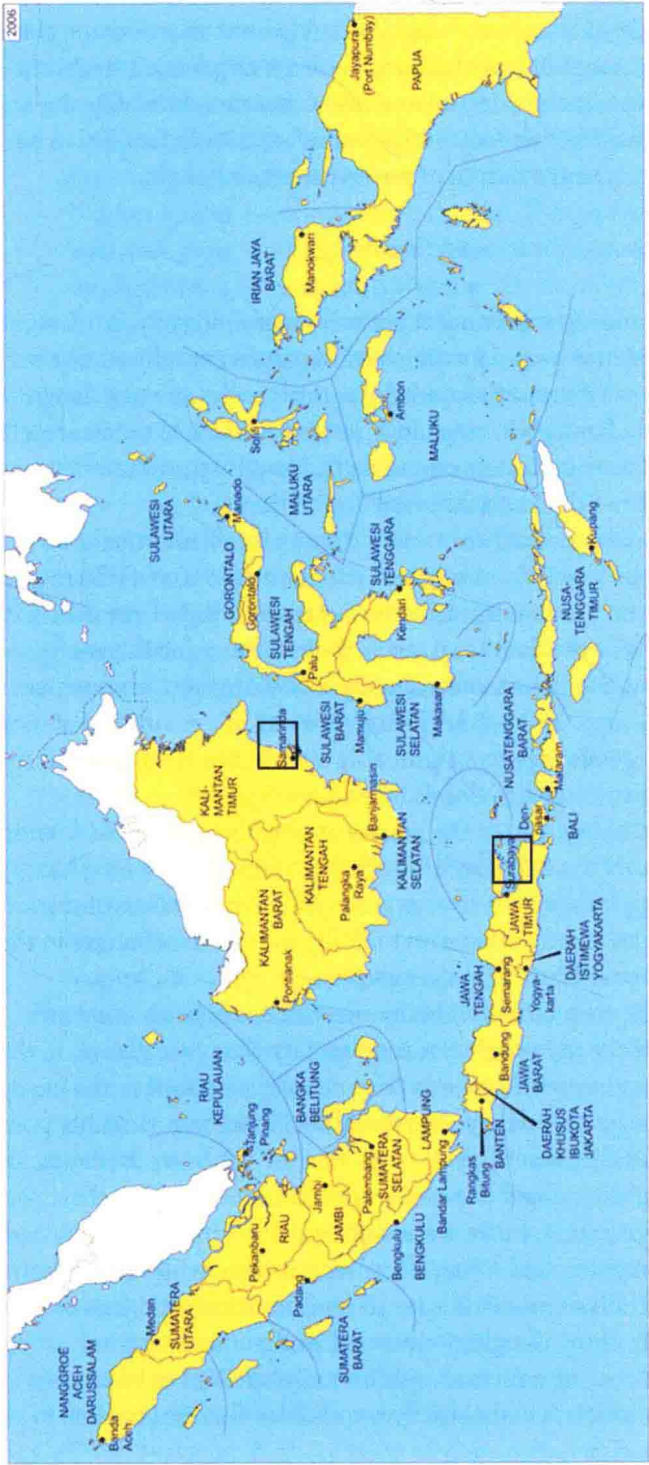
Poverty in Indonesia is not as static as the World Bank and BPS (National Board of Statistics) figures of persistent poverty might suggest. Some of the poor have lived in abject poverty all their lives, others have only recently fallen into poverty, while others have managed to climb the social ladder. Key elements are social relations offering support and protection, but surprisingly little is known about the meaning and scope of these relations today (Hüsken and Koning 2006:8). The existence or absence of social ties and relationships of care, support and social security make a great difference to the ultimate consequence of poverty on people's lives. Today, poverty in Indonesia is diverse and dynamic and, consequently, social relations of support and protection that provide social security are worthy of a more detailed study.

In this book, this persistent and yet dynamic nature of poverty will be explored in detail. The book aims at understanding the unstable, vulnerable and dynamic livelihoods of poor, Madurese people living on the margins of a nation in flux. It is based on extensive fieldwork in a village in Bondowoso, East Java, and among migrants in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, between 1998 and 2010. To maximize contrast in the case studies, the first selected location is an upland village (Krajan⁴) in rural Bondowoso, East Java, and the second is the urban Samarinda in East Kalimantan (see Map 1). In East Java, the population of Krajan speak Madurese and moved there long ago, whereas the Madurese migrants in East Kalimantan are relatively recent arrivals. While livelihoods and social relationships are reasonably established in East Java, the livelihoods of Madurese migrants in East Kalimantan are both dynamic and precarious. The book will use these two case studies of Madurese livelihoods outside Madura as a window to study the universal theme of poverty, social security and risk in Indonesia. The cases contrast the relatively stable setting of a rural society in East Java with the vagaries of migrant life in the bustling city of Samarinda and, at the same time, they are linked through the study of one ethnic group.

Although the case studies in this book deal with people living in small areas, namely the village of Krajan, close to the Argopuro Mountain in East Java, and those people working and living in the brick kilns, stone quarries, plantations and slums of Samarinda, East Kalimantan, it develops an approach which aims

3 www.worldbank.org country overview Indonesia (accessed February 2013). Exact figures differ depending on the kind of poverty line used. In January 2014, Kompas speaks of 28,55 million people in Indonesia who live below the very low BPS poverty line (Kompas, Special Supplement Indonesia Satu, Wednesday January 8, 2014: A-D).

4 Most of the names of places and people in this study are pseudonyms.



MAP 1 *Map of Indonesia. Research locations*
SOURCE: CRIBB 2010, DIGITAL ATLAS.

to go beyond the study of small localities. The study aims to overcome static images of poverty and simplified distinctions between migrant survival strategies and village support systems in isolated areas. Before addressing the key themes of this book, we will first look at the Satrawi and Patik families in East Java and illustrate the dynamic nature of poverty in more detail.

Fallen from affluence: the Satrawi family

It is hard to estimate Satrawi's age. I guess he is around sixty. Work starts to become a burden now and income hard to gain, especially when times are tough. Mr (*Pak*) Satrawi married about thirty years ago to a daughter of a relatively rich family but, nowadays, not much of these riches are left. They had six children and adopted a seventh. Now, three of their children are married, one has died and three still live at home.

'Nowadays, my household owns only a tiny plot of infertile land, not enough to feed the family for more than two months' Satrawi tells me. 'In the past, however, we belonged to the better-off'. Faded remnants of woodcarvings above the doors and inside their house recall this more glorious past. Today, the house looks shabby and worn-out, windowpanes have been sold, and the roof is in urgent need of repair. 'Our match (*jodoh*) was not good, they say. I probably should not have married my wife', Satrawi sighs, 'but what else did we do wrong?'

In front of his house, and in the houses of neighbours and old friends, I was gradually told the full story of the Satrawi family. It is a long history of a family going from riches to rags through a combination of misfortune, sheer bad luck and perhaps an inability to read the changes in the social and economic fabric of Krajan society.

After marriage, they inherited many rice fields, dry fields and cattle – they were part of the top echelon of rural society. Many recall how, in the past, Satrawi was charitable towards poor people, gave alms to the needy and staged huge parties where everybody felt welcome, even his poor neighbours. Gradually, twenty years ago, decline set in in the house of Satrawi. The rituals (*selamatan*) performed to commemorate their parents' deaths were costly, cattle were sold and land had to be pawned. Their second daughter died a year after her marriage while giving birth, leaving a grandchild to be taken care of and more costly rituals to perform. Ami, their third daughter divorced and remarried three times within six years, costing a fortune. Additionally, she had to be treated in hospital for over a month and so cattle were sold and more land had to be pawned. They had to cover most of these costs themselves as gifts and support from relatives and neighbours were insufficient.

Notwithstanding dwindling resources, Mrs (*Bu*) Satrawi continued to spend money freely on 'expensive' food such as meat, chicken, noodles, coffee and sugar. She was known for her collection of *sarong* and 'her children looked like princesses', as people say in the neighbourhood. She kept up her lifestyle even when the family income was far too low to finance all her luxurious expenditures. The pawned rice fields had to be sold, and more land had to be pawned in order to obtain credit to keep up appearances and to meet the demands of the ritual exchange economy (organizing large *selamatan* and giving expensive presents). They still hoped to recover from their misfortune but, as their main resources such as cattle and land had gone, household income fell drastically making it impossible to repay debts and regain the pawned lands.

In 1997, at the onset of the economic crisis, their situation was dire. They had fallen into the lowest stratum of the village. During the economic crisis at the end of the millennium and the subsequent rapid inflation, Satrawi's cash income dropped yet further and he could no longer buy items such as fish, eggs, noodles, coffee, sugar or cigarette wrapping paper. He had to use the dried leaves of maize cobs to roll his own cigarettes. Every time I met him, he smiled happily, but his face looked older and more tired. If I asked him how he was, the answer was always the same: '*Biasa, biasa saja, kerja terus [...] Alhamdulillah saya masih makan*', ('The same, the same, we just work on [...] Thank God, I can still eat').

Nevertheless, Satrawi was still invited to weddings, praying groups and *selamatan*, often as a special guest or as a prayer leader (freeing him from the obligation to contribute financially). He is known as a good and respectable man, a good prayer leader, as one who never complains and is always ready to join mutual help and cooperative labour activities. He does not try to keep up appearances now that he is poor. By knowing his place, he is accepted by everyone. 'His wife is different. She still has difficulties in adjusting to lower living standards and rejects work such as helping with kitchen activities in the houses of rich people', *Bu* Maryami, a neighbour, commented. 'She never learnt to work. Still today, she cannot do dirty work and instead calls her daughter to do it. *Bu* Satrawi is still so haughty. People here do not want to help her'.

Although the cash income of the household decreased substantially and prices tripled in the course of the crisis years, Satrawi's family did not slide much further down. Their own resources were completely used up, but friends and neighbouring landowners continued to offer work regularly. By working their fields, Satrawi earned some stable income in kind (rice and maize). They also helped his family out with some small loans,

free meals and invitations to religious parties and *selamatan* where food is served and can be taken home. Also, Satrawi's fourth son, Saleh, married into a richer family who owned rice fields and were also active in house construction. 'I hope Saleh will be able to support himself, and maybe us, in the future', Satrawi said.

Upwardly mobile: Patik

The story of one of Satrawi's neighbours, the Patik family, forms quite a contrast. The house of Pak Patik is made from solid bricks and stands on a hill a hundred metres above the crowded and dirty neighbourhood where Satrawi lives. While the family of Satrawi was falling from relative wealth to poverty over the course of a dozen years, in the same period the Patik family moved from rags to riches. Once, Patik and his wife worked for the Satrawi family, but now Satrawi works for the Patik family.

Pak Patik, a cattle trader, is a self-made man, and he is proud of this. He likes to wear good shirts and jeans, and often wraps an expensive Madurese sarong over his shoulders, making his tall figure even more imposing. When Patik enters a house, he enters slowly and with dignity. He says he is not even afraid of the village head, and that one day he will run for village head himself. However, when sitting in the same room as Bagenda, the village head, he is noticeably silent. Other villagers all agree that the story of Patik is a fine one, and that he is very clever, perhaps too clever, in accumulating wealth.

In the past, he was one of the former friends and frequent visitors to Satrawi's *selematan* and, just after his marriage, he worked as a poor labourer in Satrawi's fields. Nowadays, as a rich man, he seems to have forgotten the former generosity of the Satrawi family. Patik's children played in Satrawi's house and were given sweets and snacks, but now they order him around when working in the fields and only pay him a little respect because of his age. However, their father is said to be worse. 'Patik has no heart', villagers say. Even if he has ready money in his pocket, he does not lend money to less fortunate villagers such as Satrawi. 'Those people don't know how to deal with money', Patik says, 'I will not give them money, because they only know how to spend it. They should take better care of their own money'. Saleh, the son of Satrawi, put it differently: 'If I ask for help or money, there is none to be had they say, but, if I am in need and want to sell a cow, or if I need to pawn a piece of land, definitely there is money'. Indeed, half of the five hectares of land that Patik has acquired over the last fifteen years was once the property of *pak* Satrawi, his former patron and protector who is now a labourer on his own land.

In Patik's perception, he acquired his wealth on his own merits. At least that is what he likes his visitors to believe. However, people say that, in fact, it was his wife who did most of the work in managing the lands, controlling the household budget and building up a large network of labourers through exchanging gifts with neighbours and friends in the village. She comes from a relatively well-off family but only inherited a small area of rice field because her father used almost all of his land, cattle and money to finance his pilgrimage to Mecca. According to neighbours, she used to work terribly hard, and for years did not ask for anything for herself being determined to regain the 'lost' family property. She became famous for saying: 'Don't spend, save the money to buy a calf first'. Although thrifty, neighbours generally respect her, and all mention her kindness. She secretly offers free meals to poor children from the neighbourhood on a regular basis and is willing to provide small incidental loans (in the form of cash, rice or maize) to the wives of their labourers. Besides this, labourers praise the food she serves for being tasty. 'There you get real coffee, and plenty of sugar in it', they say, 'she is not like her husband, who is even too greedy to buy cigarettes for his workers'. Without her, probably no-one would have been willing to work for Patik and so she helped him build his wealth.

In Patik's view, he, and he alone, can take care of their family wealth, and he even tries to check all his wife's expenditure. Others are not entitled to his support 'because nobody has helped me in the past'. He once said, 'Why should I help someone who should be able to take care of themselves?' Only if people are struck by disaster is he willing to support them, he says. 'He doesn't notice common people. In the past he was poorer than I am, but now he only thinks about money, not about us'. Patik says himself that he doesn't want to have too many social relations. 'Having too many friends is an expensive business'.

What went wrong with the Satrawi family? Was it simply bad luck with the family hit by a series of misfortunes? Clearly, they made poor choices in maintaining a high level of consumption and by failing to accumulate as household resources dwindled. They also clung too long to their previous elite status and sold productive assets such as land and cattle to maintain this status. They kept on investing in social relations through expensive rituals, helping out and gift giving even when they were impoverished. Maybe they backed the wrong horse by clinging on too long to old village values of sharing and mutual help and expected more help in return when times got tough. When confronted