

Stories from Sekaralas

Ecofeminism in a Developing Country

by *Luanne Armstrong*

L'auteure, une fermière de la Colombie Britannique, se rappelle ses voyages en Indonésie et examine la relation des fermières de ce pays avec la terre. Elle explique comment ce

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rapport a tendance à se modifier depuis l'arrivée de la modernisation.

In 1994, I had the opportunity to travel to Indonesia, and meet women farmers. I live as a subsistence farmer on land I share with my family in the Kootenay area of British Columbia. Four generations of my family have lived on this land and I feel deeply attached to it. I wanted to learn about the relationship of Indonesian farmers to the land, and how women might express that relationship.

I knew from my reading that Java, the part of Indonesia I would be visiting, had been part of the "green revolution"—global changes in agricultural practices involving hybridized seeds, and the increased use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers to improve yields—and as a result had become self-sufficient in rice production. The island was rapidly industrializing and I wondered if women's role was changing as a result of modernization.

I am particularly interested in the ways that women relate to land. I listen for the stories about it, I tell my own stories. I feel strongly that North American culture has no language of place, no cultural context in which to express a sense of relationship. We often borrow or appropriate stories about land and place from other cultures, such as Aboriginal peoples in North America. However, because such borrowing or appropriation lacks a cultural context, it doesn't work.

I am searching for ways to speak or write narrative about land that expresses a deeper meaning about my own and other's engagement with land and place. As a white woman of European heritage, I long to re-create within my culture a sense of land and place as vital.

In my community, there is huge gap between the active role women play in community building and in community organization and the limited role they play within

agriculture, resource extraction industries, and land ownership. Environmental issues, and disputes over resource extraction are common, but women have limited access to the kind of money and power which enables them to either own land or have influence on land-use issues. Women with land, with few exceptions, own it in common with men. Land is too expensive and the work of surviving on a small piece of land is too onerous for most single women. There are a few attempts by women to share land cooperatively.

I wondered what stories I would find about land and women's relationship to land in Indonesia, if women had a say in land use, in crops, and in marketing, if the changes taking place in this "developing" nation were affecting traditional roles.

It was in this context that I spent three months with Gita Pertiwi, an environmental organization based in the city of Solo, on the island of Java. I spent much of this time working with Chandra Kirana, who founded and now heads this organization.

The role of women

In order to put my understanding into a social and political context, I tried to learn about the place and role of women in Javanese society and culture. The official state-supported religion is Islam, but other religions are also practised, mainly Christianity, Bhuddism, and Hinduism. Most of the women at Gita Pertiwi were Muslim although one woman was Catholic.

Traditional Javanese society is class based. Until independence, the country was ruled by a monarch. Since then, it has been ruled by what amounts to a military dictatorship which, at present, is headed by one very strong family, ruled by one man, President Suharto.

The official state philosophy of the Indonesian government is called *Pancasila*, the principles of which are: (1) belief in one God almighty; (2) a humanity that is just and civilized; (3) maintaining the unity of Indonesia; (4) democracy which is guided by the representative deliberation; and (5) social justice for all Indonesians.

The guiding principles for women are called *Panca Dharma Wanita*, and they are: (1) women as loyal companions to the husband; (2) women as procreators for the nation; (3) women as educators and guides for children; (4) women as regulators of the household; and (5) women as useful members of society. While the government has undertaken a number of efforts in terms of education and health, which have improved conditions for middle-class women, being a wife and mother is expected and is the expectation of most Javanese women.

I had several discussions about how difficult it was in Indonesian for women who are battered, raped, or abused in other ways, as most have no recourse to social support or to the police. Many talked openly about their fear and distrust of the military government which presently rules the country. Chandra was personally involved in two advocacy cases. One was a case of a young girl who had been kidnapped and raped by the military. The other was a case of a poor woman who had been raped by her landlord and was trying to find legal recourse. Neither case had been resolved by the time I left.

When I visited Sekaralas, the village where Chandra had



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been born and raised, I spent some time with the women of the village. Although my Indonesian was still somewhat sparse, and their usual language was Javanese, I was able to learn about many of the changes that had taken place in the village, the disappearance, for example, of the *pekarangan*, the traditional communal garden, and with it, the disappearance as well, of traditional seed varieties. This meant that the women were now dependent on a cash economy and obliged to buy their food in the market place, rather

than grow it. They often worked as day labourers in the rice fields in order to earn money.

The transition to modernization

In the cities of Java, the transition towards modernization was evident everywhere. Huge factories were being built, along with golf courses, condominiums, high-rise towers, freeways, and airports. In a country lacking arable land, farmers were often in angry but powerless disputes with the Indonesian government which expropriates land needed for industrialization from farmers with little or no compensation.

Despite Indonesia's dismal human rights record, considered by such groups as Human Rights Watch as one of the worst in Asia, western governments continue to supply massive amounts of aid and development money to the country. Indonesia has the lowest minimum wage in Asia, about \$1.20 to \$1.80 a day, but the cost of living is rising rapidly. The formation of labour unions is actively discouraged.

Economic journals talk about development in Southeast Asia as an economic miracle, and about Indonesia as one of the economic "dragons" of Southeast Asia. Caught in a terrible squeeze between an expanding population, a shrinking land base, and a limited supply of food, Asian governments see industrialization as an answer, and foreign corporations see investment opportunities with a vast potential for profit. But women like Chandra Kirana and others see that Asian societies, Asian women, and Asian natural ecologies are paying a huge price for this transformation.

The "green revolution" is a matter of public policy in Indonesia. Government supervisors decide which strains of rice farmers will plant. Thanks to hybridized varieties of rice, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers, farmers in Java now grow rice three times a year. The third crop is heavily dependent on enough rainfall since it is planted at the end of the rainy season.

Ecofeminism at Gita Pertiwi

Chandra Kirana established Gita Pertiwi with two other women friends, who still work with her in the organization and also serve as board members. Gita Pertiwi was originally formed as an Ecological Studies Project. Its goal was to develop a seed bank of traditional seed sources in order to preserve the diversity of food and medicinal plants traditionally used in Java. Gita Pertiwi has continued this work, but has also developed a number of other projects, such as educating people about the dangers of nuclear power, opposing government plans to build nuclear reactors, working with farmers to reduce pesticide use, and organizing village women to be part of a goat-raising cooperative.

Much of the work of Gita Pertiwi is still centred in the village of Sekaralas. I spent several days working with a

group of villagers, in intense heat, planting the *pekarangan*, or traditional garden, which Gita Pertiwi had re-established. There were banana and coconut trees, several kinds of bean plants, edible flowers, sweet potatoes, eggplants. Chandra showed me how many of the plants were being mulched with banana leaves against the coming dry season. Part of the garden had once been a fish pond, but this had been given up because of continued poaching of the fish by some of the other villagers.

For Chandra, the transformation in village life was something she became emotional about. She mourned the loss of a way of life which she saw as utopian and irretrievable. Chandra wrote, in an essay included in the anthology *Living with the Land: Communities Restoring the Earth*:

We lost so much of our diversity of hundreds of different grains and other living organisms, and mother earth lost much of her fertility. But what we are realizing more and more is that we have lost a large part of our self-identity, our culture. My generation, the children of the 1960s, have forgotten how to fly to the music of nature. Some of us have learned to dance to the bewitching tones of modernization, it's true, but the majority of us are lost like birds with broken wings—a process in which the green revolution was an important factor. This is especially so for the village children of Java. (51)

The knowledge of plants and sustainable farming were rapidly disappearing and remembered only by the old people in the village. One of Gita Pertiwi's projects was thus to collect the stories and record the knowledge.

Women, place, and land

As a subsistence farmer, I have a direct, intimate understanding of the land I work with. The land is both endlessly malleable and responsive, self-healing, and active. My relationship is crucially different than if I were involved in commercial agricultural production. For example, I recently planted 20 new fruit trees. Before planting them, I talked with the local agricultural advisor, who said I could receive a government subsidy for planting fruit trees if I planted them to certain specifications. They had to be planted very densely, pruned severely to discourage growth and encourage fruit production, planted under a blanket of herbicides, and sprayed regularly for pests. My orchard would then be inspected by this agriculturist to make sure I was following these specifications and at the end of three years, I could reasonably expect a high financial return. At the end of ten or twelve years, these trees would be worn out. I could remove them and replace them with new trees, again, subsidized by the government.

Because my family and I eat the food we grow and sell the surplus, we have a very direct interest in growing healthy food using a minimum of pesticides. We did not

follow this plan. If I were to engage in agribusiness, however, to sell what I produce for money and exchange that money for goods and services, my incentive would probably be to get the highest production possible from my land and the advice of the agriculturalist might then seem sensible. But, when agricultural production becomes part of a market economy, the relationship of farmers to land is changed.

Sally Sontheimer points out that women are the majority of subsistence farmers in the world. In rural cultures, their work often provides their families with a basic diet. Even though women do a large percentage of the world's agricultural work, women's access to owning or having control over land is increasingly restricted by a variety of factors such as agricultural industrialization, gender-blind development projects which do not take women into account, and lower earning power for women.

I have no way of knowing what life was like for villagers before industrialization and the "green revolution." Nevertheless, it is clear from Chandra's description of the changes she personally witnessed, there has been a loss of autonomy and empowerment for women, an empowerment which had its basis in family life and food production. There has also been a corresponding loss of biodiversity, as old varieties of seeds stopped being cultivated.

One evening, as we were driving back from the village, in the Gita Pertiwi van crammed with nine people, Chandra told me a story. The road from Sekaralas to Solo is narrow and crowded. While Chandra was telling this story, we had three near collisions with huge diesel buses. The story was actually related by a Javanese elder, a tiny woman who was a distant relative of Chandra's, while Chandra translated. According to this woman, rice threshing had always been done in the village by the women who were in charge of all aspects of the rice harvest. Threshing was done by pounding the rice in hollow logs with poles. Groups of women in different parts of the village would pound the rice in rhythm with each other, often chanting and singing as they did so. There were many village threshing songs, each distinguished by a different rhythm; when one woman would begin a rhythm, the rest would take it up and the whole village would resound to the rhythm and chanting of the rice harvest. There were also many rituals associated with the rice harvest. The first sheaf of harvest rice would be ritually cooked and that meal dedicated to the rice goddess.

However, when cultivation of the new hybridized varieties of rice began, the farmers were ordered to take the rice to a government threshing machine. The night before the rice was to be taken to this threshing machine, each man in the village had the same dream. The rice goddess appeared to each of them, crying and begging them not to use the threshing machine. "Don't thrash me, don't thrash me," were the words Chandra repeated. Nevertheless, from that point on, the rice was threshed by machine and the rituals dedicating the harvest to the rice goddess disappeared.

Conclusion

My time in Java was short and full of challenges. I was constantly aware that I was seeing everything through western eyes, and that Indonesian society is extremely complex. I knew I was not seen as a farmer, but as a westerner, someone with money who could afford to travel. I wanted to sit down with the women in their houses, talk about goats and crops and gardens, but the barriers of language and culture prevented me.

Industrialization and environmental destruction will continue in countries like Java for quite some time, as governments race to catch up to what they see as western standards of living and western ideals. Women like Chandra Kirana are caught in the middle, struggling to care for their families, make a living, keep their political lives intact, and maintain their culture.

As a farmer, I struggle constantly with lack of money. My rural community slowly fragments as subdivisions appear. My family and I eat well, but increased taxation combined with rising land prices makes the future of our farm obscure. I know that small farms and rural culture are endangered all over North America. My sense of isolation from other writers and the endless work load are difficult. A lifestyle like ours is increasingly rare, for many reasons.

How I wish I could have shared with the Javanese women our sense of connection to where we live, our worries for the future. Although our lives may look different, I am sure that many of our concerns, our losses, our basic affinities with land are much the same.

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LUANNE ARMSTRONG

A Village Named Sekaralas

If, after hearing the stories told about her
the rice goddess returned as a green spider
or, at least, someone came by
as a spider, miniature, round
iridescent,
astonishingly emerald
and jumped up on my pants and leapt
and jumped on a hot afternoon
in a village whose name means
Flower of the Forest
and no one said anything or noticed
that the goddess was leaping
like an emerald
out of the garden
and spinning a web
from my green cotton Canadian pants
to the ancient wall
while I also spun and spun
and the garden grew in dizzy circles
and I thought I might fall over
all these new edges

as the goddess spun
me dizzy
and choking

and the green spider was
greener than any
emerald
leaping and dancing
while I sat very still and
sweated, trying to breathe
in the garden
in the white brilliance
of another
late hot afternoon.

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