

YOUTH CULTURE IN *Asia*

WEEK THREE

As you read through Youth Culture in Asia, try to imagine what it would be like to live in these other lands. This Newspapers In Education series is in partnership with the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies and runs every Tuesday through March 20.

Photo courtesy of S. Chris Brown,
University of Washington.

Photo: Fourteen year old Narti is covered in flour on her birthday in Surabaya, Indonesia.



Keeping in Touch in Java

By S. Chris Brown

“We’re going to meet in front of the cinema, okay?” Budi, 12 years old, waves to a group of his friends eating colorful shaved ice while rapidly tapping out a text message on his phone to someone else. His English language club likes to come here to hang out and look for foreigners to speak to. In one of the largest shopping malls in Surabaya, with seven floors spread out over five different buildings, cell phones are indispensable for finding your friends — and for calling your driver when you need to be picked up afterwards.

Surabaya is the second largest city in the vast island nation of Indonesia. The population is younger on average than in the U.S. and it only achieved independence about 50 years ago. Even the name “Indonesia” is fairly new: it was at a youth conference in 1928 that the word “Indonesia” was chosen for the country, its language, and its people. But a lot has changed since then. For one thing, when the Dutch ruled, only a few Indonesians got a middle-school education. Now almost everyone does, and most go on to high school. Although classes are taught in Indonesian, the majority of students start out speaking some other regional language at home, like Javanese, one out of the hundreds spoken across the archipelago.

Yan, a 14-year-old girl, would rather be at the mall, but instead she’s working at her family’s vegetable stall at the bazaar.

“It smells awful” she says, wrinkling her nose. But working there is more bearable now that she has a cell phone; in between bargaining with customers, she sends text messages to her friends about the boys she likes, and collapses in fits of giggling at the answers they send back.

Socializing — hanging out and talking — is highly valued and often lasts far into the night. In a tropical climate, the air is much fresher then, and it is quite common to see families with small children out at midnight for a snack at

a roadside café. In many cities on the island of Java, people spread mats on the sidewalk in the evenings and sell tea, coffee and snacks to customers who take off their shoes and lounge cross-legged by the street. Narti makes a living going through the cafés playing music for tips. She says she has to help her family earn money rather than attend school. “I’m not a kid anymore — I’m almost 14 now. They need me.”

Narti doesn’t want to say exactly when her birthday is. “My friends will ambush me if they know,” she says. It probably wouldn’t surprise you to learn that kids like to tease people on their birthdays. Kids have invented their own ways of celebrating. They like to torment their friends by giving them fake presents, breaking eggs over their heads and covering them with flour. No birthday is truly complete until the victim gets soaked. Sometimes you just get doused with a bucket of water, but ideally you are tossed into a pool or a river — maybe even a sewer.

The birthday custom is a bit odd, because, until recently, birthdays didn’t really exist on Java. Of course, there was always a day you were born, but most people didn’t keep track of the birthday custom on an annual calendar. Java has lots of different calendars running simultaneously on various cycles. For example, there are cycles of 3, 5, or 7 days, instead of our annual 365 days. Since you had a “birthday” in each of the cycles, it was nothing to get excited about. Nowadays schools, most businesses and government offices operate on a yearly schedule. Birthdays have also been heavily promoted by some international fast-food chains, complete with boxed meals, party hats, clowns and magicians.

A few weeks later Narti stood with her hair dripping wet in front of the mall. She’d just changed into fresh clothes, but her friends weren’t done — they rushed in and threw handfuls of flour over her. “It’s okay,” she said. “Now we can get a photograph.” She was a little bit proud of all the attention she got. It can be quite an ordeal, but people say it goes to show how much your friends care about you. And it is another example of how Indonesian kids find new ways to carry on old values of socializing.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Why does Narti have to work?
- 2) What language do you think Yan uses to text message and talk to her friends?
- 3) Why were birthdays not necessarily celebrated in the past in Indonesia?

MORE TO EXPLORE

After reading this week’s article, make a list of questions you still have about youth culture in Indonesia. After doing further research, create a graphic organizer, such as a Venn diagram, showing the similarities and differences between your life and that of someone your age who lives in Indonesia. Share these findings as a class.

NEXT WEEK: NEW AND OLD CONNECTIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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