



## FEELING FOOLISH

I have been terribly embarrassed and felt extremely foolish many times, most often because of some thoughtless remark or action on my part. In retrospect, however, one of my most embarrassing moments was brought about, at least in part, because I had been born and reared in the United States.

A surprising number of Americans, when abroad, expect everybody to speak English, and many of us refuse to even attempt to converse in our host's language. To make bad matters worse, we have just about stopped teaching foreign languages in school, except at the college level, and by that time one is too old to easily learn a new language. Children easily and quickly master languages, even two or three concurrently, and apparently have little difficulty in selecting the proper one for a given occasion.

Unfortunately I was not exposed to any foreign language except a little Latin in high school until I took some courses in German in college. I learned to read German passably, but could not converse. I later learned to read French, but even that modicum of ability is now lost.

On this general subject of languages lies the root of one of my most embarrassing moments.

About twenty or so of us were pig hunting one fine day high up in the mountains of west central Java where many tea estates had been carved out of the jungle. We traveled in Jeeps, and a substantial number of the hunters were Indonesian army personnel. I had not previously met a number of the hunters, but I had been out on numerous occasions with some of the others.

As we were traveling from the area of one successful drive to another site a thunderstorm began to develop, and as the weather worsened we began to talk of seeking shelter. Fortunately the headquarters of a Dutch- owned tea estate was not more than two or three miles distant, and as some of our party were acquainted with the old Dutchman who managed the estate, we departed post-haste to seek shelter there.

We arrived just before the storm broke, and the old gentleman invites us (in Bahasa Indonesia) into his home for tea and cookies until the storm abated. Not wishing to be a bother, we tried to decline and seek

shelter in a nearby shed, but he was not to be denied. We were obviously too many to find shelter in his home, so several of the hunters sought shelter in the shed while the rest of us trooped into the living room just as the rain began to fall in torrents.

There was a huge round table in the middle of the room, and at the old man's invitation we all found chairs, drew them up to the table, and seated ourselves. Shortly thereafter servants brought in pitchers of tea and mounds of delicious cookies.

There were nine of us about that table: the old Dutchman; four Indonesians (one from Sumatra, one from central Java, and two from west Java); one Italian; one Chinese; one Arab; and I, the lone American. I recognized seven separate languages and two distinct dialects in use about the table, but Dutch, Bahasa Indonesia, German, Italian, and English were the commonest ones.

It seemed that everyone about the table was fluent in most of these. I heard questions asked in one language, and responses in three or four. There was no one around that table, save me, who had command of less than three languages, and most were about to converse intelligently in six or seven.

So far as I was aware, only the Italian and I had college degrees; I was the only one with a graduate degree, and I had two. However, in the group about that table, I was the dummy. Perhaps they did not notice. In any event, not one of them ever mentioned the episode to me,

but I can never forget how horribly foolish I felt that day.

Roger W. Barbour, *Indonesian Interlude*, MSS,  
pp 118-120.

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**R**oger Barbour was one of my graduate professors when I was pursuing a master's degree in zoology at the University of Kentucky back in the Jurassic Period, eons ago. He was one of the most interesting men I have ever met – with a doctorate from Cornell University. Although he was a mammalogist, I had my first course in ornithology with him. He was one of the best field men extant, and liked nothing better than going out at midnight with a half dozen graduate students, turning over rocks along a stream, searching for salamanders. He was also an expert in herpetology.

This excerpt from his unpublished memoirs describes an episode in Indonesia where he enjoyed a year of exchange duty with an Indonesian scientist. He was a lifelong friend, and I delivered the eulogy at his funeral, and hand-set type and printed my manuscript on my 8x12 C&P. One of his sons is Dr. James Barbour, chairman of the economics department at Elon College, in North Carolina, who inherited his intellect and great sense of humor.

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