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### ***Family Victim: The "Bad Coconut" of a Javanese Family***

From the Afflictions: Culture and Mental Illness in Indonesia series. Produced and Directed by Robert Lemelson. 2010. 38 minutes.

In English and Indonesian with English subtitles

*Study areas:* Southeast Asia, Indonesia, anthropology, mental illness, family life



The title of *Family Victim: The "Bad Coconut" of a Javanese Family* draws on a Javanese proverb that says there is "a bad coconut in every bunch" or as the related Balinese proverb would have it "not all coconuts from the same tree have milk." This film shows with amazing sensitivity the complexities of a deviant personality within the strongly cooperative bonds of a large Javanese family. The one who is poorly adjusted, named Estu, has taken resources from his parents and siblings to support his gambling habit, he has often broken the possessions of others in destructive rages, and he has even threatened to kill his brother or his wife and their children through sorcery. Yet he feels that he is the one being misunderstood. He is the one not being listened to by his parents and siblings. He tries to tell them of his true feelings and anger by writing graffiti on the inside walls of his house and shop. The title "Family Victim" stems from one particular outburst. Despite the trouble he keeps causing his family, he is the victim! He explains that he has taken on all their misfortunes and they have taken on all his potential successes for themselves. So in his eyes he is a true family victim. On another wall he says he will get revenge. In tears his own sister tells of their mother having been driven to pray to God asking him to "please take Estu back," for they have done all they can to take care of him. Somehow they have failed and can do no more. From where has all this pain and bitterness come?

That is the question director Robert Lemelson and his two Javanese colleagues. Dr.

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Mahar Agusno and his wife Dr. Ninik Supartini, a psychiatrist and a psychologist respectively, try to answer in this film. Estu is in fact Ninik's own brother. He had been included in a sample of poorly adjusted individuals Agusno and Supartini had been studying in central Java, Indonesia. Their joint research with anthropologist Lemelson is on culture and mental illness. Their intimate acquaintance with this case and their mutual sensitivity with regard to Estu and his family members makes for an exceptionally revealing account. It is frank, deeply well informed, and carried out over many years so as to have the effect of being an in depth longitudinal study. We get to see what can happen over time and in unforeseen ways in such difficult relationships as these.

The sadness of Estu's wife is brought out powerfully in interviews. She has all she can do to put up with Estu's irresponsible behavior, yet she so values her duties as a wife and mother that she stays on in the relationship. Her commitment to these kinship norms in the face of overwhelming interpersonal difficulties with Estu makes her emblematic of what, in the long run, this film has to tell. The film successfully and powerfully documents the emotional costs of trying over time to draw relationships as experienced back into line with relationships as valued in line with the normative ideals of a culture. By the end of the seven or more years covered by the film, things do improve for Estu and for his wife but not because of anything that anyone ever could have predicted.

Was Estu spoiled as a child? Was he possessed by a spirit? Was he jealous over the success of his seven brothers and sisters? Was he just "lazy and hard headed?" Why was he unable to stick to anything for more than three months? Why was music the only thing that satisfied him? Estu is able to play the drums in a band made up of friends. Why is he so irresponsible and untrustworthy?

A variety of different yet culturally appropriate answers these questions are suggested. All, including Estu himself, agree that the argument about being spoiled as a child holds some merit. Estu also puts a great deal of trust in traditional healers who themselves seem quite puzzled about his problems. He would relapse after every cure, but they agree he has another person inside him who gives him bad thoughts. At one point he attaches himself to a magician through a formal ritual adoption, to help him be successful without, or with less, family support. When Irah, the magician later dies, her spirit continues to direct Estu. She is the mother figure who loves him more than his natural parents. Other *dukun*, or curers, see this as merely adding to Estu's problems. One *dukun* took him to a graveyard at night and made him hug tombstones and sign an oath in his own blood to change his ways. Another told him that he had married too early and that is why he and his wife fight so much. Yes, "everyday," admits Estu in front of his wife, both laughing good-naturedly in front of the researchers. The good news from the *dukun* is that although it would take a long time, eventually his married life would become peaceful. So, things in the long run were not as gloomy as Estu had been stating them in his graffiti comments about :life without hope."

Throughout all this recalling of earlier attempts to settle Estu's problems, Estu is very forthcoming with Lemelson and his colleagues. Likewise, no one is ever judgmental in interviews with Estu. Estu himself seems to have developed a fairly close relationship with Lemelson, affectionately calling him, "Pak Rob," or "Dad Rob." He frequently expresses the wish to change, to correct his behavior. As a husband and a father of one young son he wants to be more responsible. But he still wants to be a "big man," too. So at this early point in the story he keeps gambling.

During one interview session, Dr. Agusno asks Lemelson on the side what Estu's case would be called in America. Would Estu be classed as a 'psychopath?' Lemelson answers that in his own culture, perhaps he would be "normal"! Considering the various differences and between the two cultures particularly the desire of many Americans to act very independently as does Estu, Estu's "normalcy" if in America would be a genuine possibility. But that last detail is not mentioned, so Lemelson's comment

comes partly in the way of a joke to himself but also among his cross-cultural colleagues. This reviewer enjoyed the "joke."

Estu's parents left their family house and all its memories of better days because they had given up and were afraid that Estu would either sell or destroy all their furnishings and other remaining items. Dr. Supartini is shocked by this and deeply saddened. As the camera pans the empty house and older neighbors come to comfort her she says, "the house is now like Estu's body, empty, messy, and lifeless." The idea of messiness and emptiness come up in a few places as signs of depression. This might make a good starting point for discussions of how this film contributes to cross-cultural understandings of mental illness, especially depression.

In a more culture-laden response to this same event, Estu himself leaves his house with a dagger, perhaps one like the classic Javanese *kris*, to go and kill his father. We never learn directly what was on Estu's mind that morning, however. Had the parents taking their belongings away from the family home been a final insult against what little remained of Estu's honor in their estimation? Already, his mother had told him he could only enter the house as a guest, or *tamu* in Indonesian. Why did he feel so put down by this? Others were taking precautions of their own against Estu's behavior. They did not want him to visit their families because of his threats. They cut down valuable teak trees so he could not sell them. But now his parents took this final step to bring down Estu's self-esteem. His wife says only that Estu "was angry and left the house with a dagger in his hand." The *kris*, a wavy bladed personal dagger, is an heroic weapon of honor, often heirloom, and especially a traditional index of male honor. This seems a powerful statement of overt desire for pure revenge and the restoration of honor by Estu against his own father. If Estu was intent on killing his father, he had, in a sense, chosen to do so in the most honorable way possible. Fortunately for all concerned, Estu's father was safely guarded in the house of Estu's brother.

Clearly serious alienation and hatred are portrayed in this powerful film. Yet there always seems to be an element of politeness and mutual regard in all the communications shown throughout every interview. The distinctly Javanese quality of a smoothed and balanced expression of feelings, the Javanese concept of *halus*, or "refined conduct" keeps everything in line. In keeping with this, the musical background to the film and the visuals of landscape, sunrises and sunsets, plus a full moon scene for a decisive dream encounter, all make everything, whether good or bad, come together in an aesthetic blend that intends to heal and to bring balance. These features of the film are especially pleasing and will make anyone who has ever visited Java homesick.

The continuing concern of family members towards Estu and of Estu towards them despite the profound hostility in their relationships often shows up in the way problems are discussed so openly and so willingly. It is as though Javanese kinship norms were a boat at sea and the whole family had been thrown off the boat of in a storm, the storm of Estu's conduct. But eventually they all struggle to get back onto the boat and steady its course. In fact, this is more or less what happens as Estu's life starts to take some turns for the better.

Three key turning points are pointed out. First, Estu's father has a serious illness and Estu comes "without complaining" to help. He tells his father how he really loves him and asks to be forgiven. In an apparent coma, the father raises his hand as a sign that he has heard and forgiven Estu. Second, Estu has a dream in which he sees a cocoon in a stream. He hears his parents, now deceased, telling him to watch but to leave the cocoon alone. A grasshopper comes out of the cocoon and flies away. They tell him to continue on with his life and he will have a better future. Third, Estu and his wife have a second child, a daughter. Estu becomes so devoted to her that he becomes more responsible overall. It will still take time for full reconciliations among family members, but Estu's difficulties which had lasted for seven years now seem to be ending.

Lemelson points out that "both field work and clinical research are based on

communication and trust. There could be no better proof of this claim than this compelling account of Estu and his family in this very captivating film. Lemelson further points out that over the period of knowing and investigating Estu many things changed. This was true for the researchers as well as for the subjects. In the end it may be that Estu had finally become more reconciled with the values of his culture. No simple explanation for either the disturbance or its resolution seem obvious, but without the caring and sensitive effort to follow this case over seven years or more, we would not have this unique testimony to the power of communication and trust to expand understanding and to produce healing. These documentarians have done great job presenting this story.

My one criticism of this film is that the subtitles often flash by before they can easily be read. Viewers are sure to lose some key points in dialogue because of this. The translations are excellent but the time to read them is often too short, sometimes making it necessary to stop and review sections where the subtitles have passed too quickly.

**Robert McKinley** received his Ph. D in anthropology from the University of Michigan, specializing in social organization and Southeast Asian Studies. His primary research has been on child transfers and siblingship within a Malay community in Malaysia. He has concentrated on comparative studies in kinship, ritual, and religion. He has taught since 1973 at Michigan State University, first in Anthropology and presently in Religious Studies. He has been a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Malaya, and a visiting lecturer at the National University of Singapore and at the University of Michigan. He's current projects include a comparative study of religions among hunting and gathering peoples, and an ethnography of kin re-incarnations among Cambodians.

**Family Victim** is available online from the distributor's [website](#).

**Family Victim** is produced by Elemental Productions an ethnographic documentary film company focusing on the relationship between culture, psychology, and personal experience in Indonesia and the United States.

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