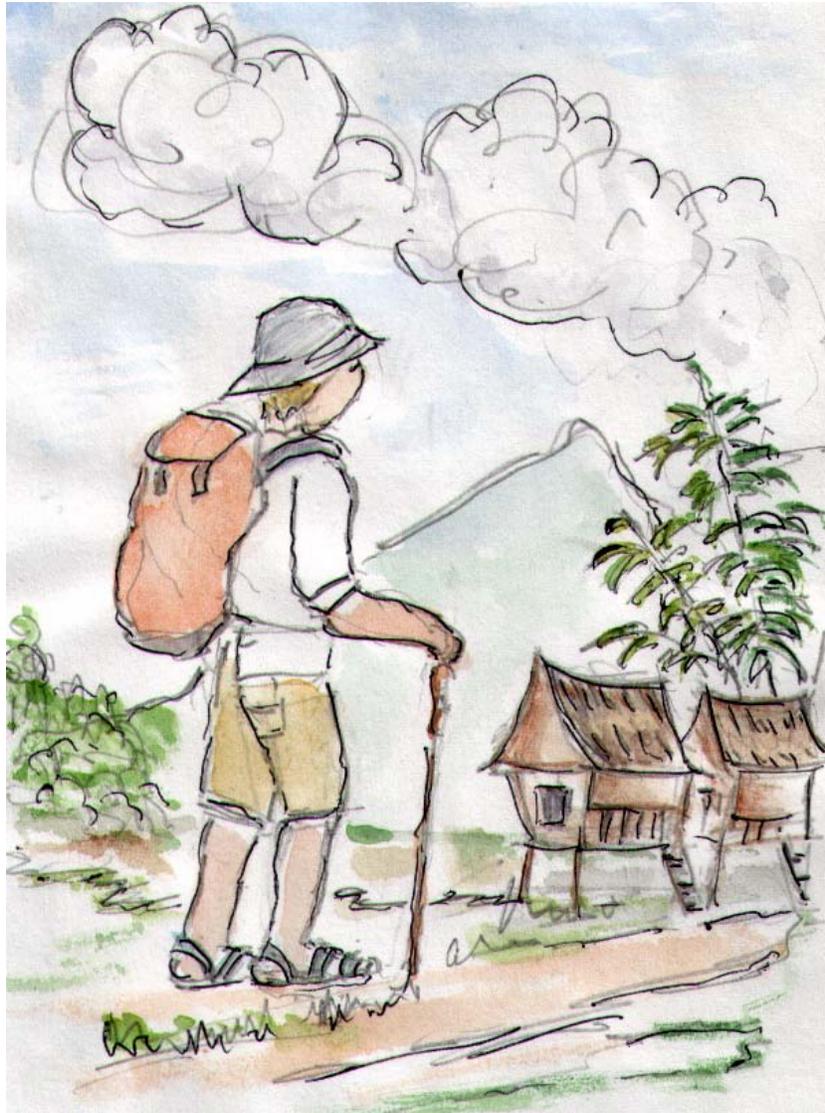


# WHITE WITCH DOCTOR

AN ENGLISH 'BUSH DOCTOR' IN SUMATRA



ANTHONY AIKMAN

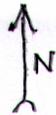
## 1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

'When you die,' inquired the village Headman, 'What will we do with your body?'

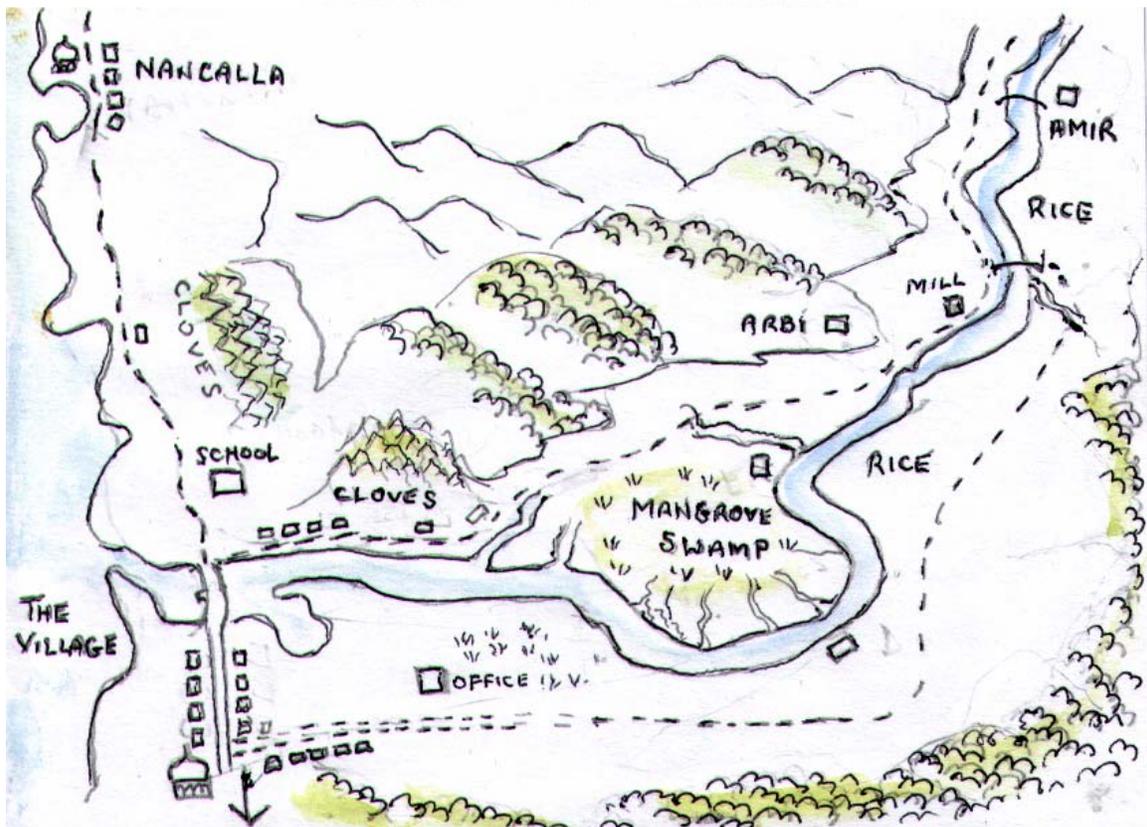
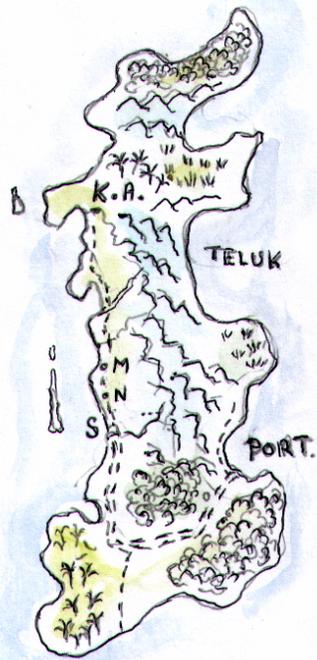
It was not a question I had expected at our first meeting, although later on I could understand his concern. In Sumatra anyone who dropped dead had to be buried before Sunset. As I was a foreigner there might be a complication. At the time however I found it disconcerting to be asked where I wanted to be buried before I had even found a place to live.

Tuan Arbi, the 'Kepala Desa' (village headman) at Salur on the remote west coast of the island was dressed from head to foot (barring his shoes) in the official party colors. As a message of political loyalty it was impressive but from a sartorial aspect – buttercup yellow looks rather startling on a man especially when it includes peaked cap, shirt, trousers and even socks. As if to stamp his personal convictions even more, Tuan Arbi's skin bore a distinctly jaundiced pallor and the white of his eyes – weren't. They squinted like smoky oil lamps, and despite the smile he had fashioned and frozen for the occasion, as his inspecting glance flickered over me I felt uncomfortably as if I was in the presence of a poisonous snake seeking my most vulnerable spot to strike.

I had arrived in the village a few days before. It was where the coastal track around the southern part of the island ended. A packed, and dilapidated truck made – with luck – a daily trip from the island's only town situated in a muddy mangrove bay on the south east coast. Although the distance was only about 25 kilometres, the journey often took more than three hours allowing for breakdowns and bridges – or rather the lack of bridges – many of which consisted of a pair of tree trunks balanced over a stream. At each bridge the male passengers got out to help re-align the logs. Unless one had a spare spine it was not a journey to make too often. Beyond Salur a sandy path followed the coast north under groves of coconut palms until this too ended at a river too wide to bridge or ford.



THE ISLAND



As this was reputed to be home to some large and hungry crocodiles, travellers relied on failing an ancient one-legged boatman (I nicknamed Charon) to ferry them over.

From Salur a leaking, lop-sided, so-called speedboat – simply on account of its possessing an engine – made a five hour journey to Kampong Air, the island's second capital – a title it could claim on account of boasting an electricity generator and a secondary school.

The only reason anyone except inhabitants came to Salur was to catch the boat, but if there were storms they might have to wait days and there was nowhere to stay. Salur consisted of about 100 yards of wooden houses ending at a river estuary. There was a '*rumah makan*' (chop house) where depending on the time of day and inclination of the owner one could '*makan nasi*' (eat rice). I had already spent two nights sleeping in the attic of '*makan nasi*', and had been trying – with growing desperation – to decide how best to escape. Either on the next boat north or the island bus south (which had broken its axle somewhere). When foolhardy enough to open my first-aid kit I found half the village lining up with leg ulcers, scabies, head rashes, malaria and coughs. '*Makan Nasi*' became a village surgery.

Towards evening a tall moustachioed man approached. He had an educated air about him. 'Do you want to live here?' he asked. 'I know of an empty house.'

While I could think of many reasons why not to live there I didn't wish to sound impolite. 'You are a doctor?' he asked. I nodded. Although not strictly true in the qualified sense, in Indonesia it is best to have a profession (so long as it's not a journalist), a religion – provided it belongs to one of the five officially sanctioned faiths (protestant and catholic count for two of them!) – and a wife, or a very good reason for not having a wife.

Years before in Italy I had joked to the local Mayor that I was 'retired', only he thought I said 'retarded' and it took a lot of living down. I hadn't made the same mistake since.

My only formal qualification is a science degree in forestry, but I skipped so many courses I missed out on 'identification' and couldn't tell one tree from another. I did know a bit about how plants, insects and microbes work and human physiology isn't so very far removed. In Nicaragua I had been a medical volunteer with the Sandinistas and later helped on a mission boat plying the headwaters of the Amazon. My guide in those days had been a small St John's Brigade First Aid book – white emblem on a black cover. It was invaluable for splints, burns, topical cures. At Puerto Villerhoel, a settlement in the Ichito River I met a Scottish missionary who was never without his black book of common prayer. Somehow the two got mixed up for the next time I went to check on 'paralysis' the pages opened at Psalms and no doubt when the missionary went to pray he was confronted by 'pneumonia'. By then he was far away down river and our paths never again crossed. Later in Cambodia someone gave me a copy of 'Where there is no doctor,' and that plus surgical advice by the casualty officer at my local hospital in England whenever I returned on leave provided an answer to most problems I was confronted with.

I always consoled myself that I was probably no worse than a doctor in the Crimean War, and I was no more a fraud than the explorer Burton in the last century. I remember in Yemen how a grocer in Sa'na suddenly changed profession by buying a white coat and writing 'Doctor' over the door. In the Yemen anyone could be a doctor but local opinion wisely advised if you were sick always go to an old doctor as he's probably learned from earlier 'long buried' mistakes. I was fortunately inured to personal misgivings after a spell at a children's leper settlement in the Solomon Islands. When I imprudently asked the tough old Australian matron if I should wash my hands in alcohol she replied

forcefully, 'If you don't give those kids a bloody good hug you'll have me to answer to!'

Doctor Charles, my English adviser had an Indian background and was well versed in local remedies, viz. Test for diabetes: Piss near an ants trail. If the ants go for it – it must be sweet. Positive diagnosis!

## 2. GETTING THERE

Because the island truck never arrived I greeted with enthusiasm the schoolmaster's proposal I stay at his house – anything was better than another night perched above the creaking rafters of the Rumah Makan.

The village started with a mosque and ended with a bridge – one of the very few still standing, which was ironic since the road went no further. Out to sea breakers boomed on the reefs and spanning the horizon lay a long low island simply referred to as *Pulau* (island). Evening fishermen were gliding home in their sailing outriggers and kids were playing football or doing acrobatics on the sand.

Crossing the river we came to the schoolmaster's house. It was one of a row of pretty cottages behind neat bamboo fences along the far bank, tucked below a hill covered with clove trees. Cloves were the island's only industry, and general well-being followed the rise but more often the fall of its commodity price. Cloves are a vital part of the Indonesian economy because they are used in cigarettes. To a European, puffing cloves may seem a trifle odd, but the spiced cigarettes or *Kreteks* are very popular in a nation where every male from infancy onwards chain-smokes his way to an early asthmatic grave.

A large sign over the door announced '*Golkar*' which I assumed was the schoolmaster's name and addressed him as such. He looked puzzled but smiled and introduced his cheerful, tubby wife. A boy was despatched to buy a fish for supper and in the meantime Golkar took me to meet the village headman. It was only later I realised my mistake. Golkar was in fact the official political party of President Suharto and just as Tuan Arbi proclaimed loyalty dressing up in buttercup, the schoolmaster declared his by the door sign. This only dawned on me when over the next few days I noticed that – according to names on doors just about everyone in the place was called Golkar. In the meantime I kept addressing the schoolmaster as Tuan Golkar which might have been seen as a



Tuan Arbi's ouse



Tuan Arbi's View



Rusjad

subversive political tease. Actually he was Rusjad and when I later nicknamed him 'Raja Golkar' and his wife 'The Commandant' both rather enjoyed the titles.

Although I had already spent two days in Salur I had never walked up river and as we stepped around the hill a new and enchanting valley scene lay revealed before me. The river wound between a patchwork of green rice fields where scattered farms stood amid clumps of bamboo and shady mangos. Clusters of clove trees dotted the lower slopes while above towering forest giants crowned the hilltops. Somewhere beyond rose a blue wall of mountains.

The headman's house was up a knoll covered with giant bamboos. From here he commanded an excellent view up and down the valley. He could see and greet whoever was passing, either along the path or the river – where there was a constant traffic of canoes. Seawards the silvery dome of the minaret prompted him to reflect on his various political responsibilities while a survey of his rice-fields spread out below brought him back to his domestic concerns.

He was in the process of swapping one for the other as we arrived and emerged to greet us adjusting his yellow party hat. Rusjad made the introduction and then changed to the island language – of which I understood not a word – to conduct negotiations. There are over 250 totally different *kampong* (community) languages in the Indonesian Archipelago, but they have nothing in common with each other or the official '*Bahasa Indonesia*'.

Judging by his nods Tuan Arbi appeared to give his consent if not approval to my possible stay in his community and after we had shared a formal glass of sweet tea we shook hands and retired – allowing him to complete preparations for his evening entry to the village and to mull over the prospect of a foreigner moving in to his valley.

I arrived in the island on a whim and perhaps a prayer too. The previous months had been spent on the coast of mainland Sumatra some way further south. Behind the village of Myra a small river flowed out of jungled hills and by clambering upstream I discovered as near a tropical paradise as I could wish for; - cascading waterfalls, pools to swim in, shady trees to hitch up a hammock, an abundance of colorful birds and butterflies, and even a rather elusive family of orang-utans (people of the forest) for company. Wild fruit hung within reach – overripe mangos, manggis that stained your fingers, hairy rambutans, apple-red jambos, — and while munching the pulp and spitting out the pips, there was the reward of splendid views spanning a bay studded with palm girl islands.

Myra was a Christian enclave of rival Batak and Nias people whose religion was the only thing they had in common. The Nias people came from a large island some 100 kms westwards. I had already been there and had no particular wish to return but tropical islands always exert a certain appeal (- at least until you get there). Add to it a romantic sounding name like Inisfree or Avalon and next minute one is tempted to make enquiries how to get there. This was how I came to be at the remote island I was now on. The good Christians of Myra were appalled. ‘Don’t go there!’ they insisted. ‘They are all fanatical muslims!’

It’s one of life’s paradoxes that the more we are told not to do something, the more attractive it seems. And when even the guide book dismissed the island in a couple of lines ‘remote, no roads, no hotels, take a tent ...’ its allure waxed ever more strongly. My inquiries discovered a boat – the Bintang Java (star of Java – although as Bintang is also the national brand of beer it could just possibly refer to that!) – plied up the west coast whenever it had enough consignments on board to warrant the trip. The Bintang Java was the most elusive boat I’ve ever known – not even the port office knew where it was but I finally found it listing amid the rotting debris and slime sluicing around a particularly inaccessible jetty. I bribed a crew member to reveal the secretive departure date and made my farewells.

The Bintang Java was a ship no Lutine bell at Lloyds the underwriters would ever toll over when it vanished with a few bubbles from the surface of the sea, since no insurer would be mad enough to take it on. The list was only partly corrected by heaping most of the cargo on one side. With more misgivings I noticed there were no navigational aids – not even a compass. I pointed this absence to an unshaven and disheveled tramp in the wheelhouse who turned out to be the Captain. He was unconcerned and merely pointed to a picture of the holy black shrine in Mecca, declaring ‘Allah – peace be unto him – is our compass.’ And Allah – be praised – did a good job. Apart from showering the half-a-dozen passengers crowded onto the only deck space – with sooty smuts from a broken funnel, he kept a watchful eye on our progress. Even a storm in the night failed to capsize us and next day after passing between an archipelago of islands and clear coral seas we reached our destination late the next afternoon.

By now the allure of the island had largely evaporated. The guide book was right. There were no hotels. But I still had my hammock which is often more practical. All one needs (in theory) is a pair of trees (preferably not palms with ripe coconuts dangling overhead), and a sheet of plastic above in case of rain. I got the idea from Charles Warburton – an eccentric traveller of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who collected crocodiles in South America by leaping on their backs and tying their jaws together with his trousers. It was dark by the time I had eaten supper and set off out of town to find my trees, so I couldn’t see where I was and next morning found myself camping in an overgrown Christian cemetery – a relic of Dutch colonial rule. When I inquired if there were any Christians on the island the good muslims chuckled scornfully and said ‘only dead ones’. Later the morning truck saw me and stopped. It was assumed I would be going to Salur since there was no other destination.

### 3. THE HOUSE

The vacant house Rusjad showed me was conveniently near his. It was a long spacious but neglected bungalow with a courtyard in the middle and a kitchen with a fireplace at the rear. The courtyard had a well and the kitchen was thatched with sago palm. The thatch was rotten and the rain dripped through. Elsewhere the house was roofed with rusty corrugated iron. A broken meter and frayed wires suggested there had once been electricity – for the village was at the tail end of the island cable and received the flickering and inconsistent ‘left-overs’ after all the intervening villages had drained off their own needs. In due course we connected up a line to Rusjad but this put me even more under his control. For Rusjad was a man whose primary concern was his health and I soon realised the only reason he wanted me in the village was to act as his personal physician. Once I was wired up to him – he only had to switch me off if I was at all slow or neglectful in my capacity as his medical adviser. That first evening, with the light fading, my chief concern was who might help clean and cook, but the solution appeared almost at once in the shape of Toni – a well-built lad from next door. Toni didn’t look in the least oriental and his younger brother, with a brush of blonde hair, even less so. I wondered if during the long history of the island, when European ships approached the East Indies and put into this island outpost for water and supplies whether a certain amount of cross-fertilisation may have occurred, for I was often startled to meet a face that would not have been out of place in a Sussex village.

Hendra, the owner, was a fisherman in his early twenties who lived with his mother, a thin, shrill, inquisitive woman in a small house near the sea. We agreed on a rental of 30,000 rupiah a month (about £8) to be paid in two, six monthly instalments. Rusjad’s front room also served as an office and on a machine with blackened keys and a ribbon frayed to death by repeated battering he tapped out the contract. Toni was despatched to the village shop to buy a stamp and with our signatures witnessed by the good schoolmaster I found myself the tenant of a

house in Salur, wondering ruefully that if only the island 'bus' hadn't broken down by now I might be in the port waiting for a ferry to ship out.

#### 4. SUPPLIES

Next morning the island bus arrived and Toni and I crowded on board to go to town and fetch essential supplies. Unfortunately there was no avoiding Tuan Arbi, who in his butterfly bright apparel was already seated in front beside the driver. When we reached the town two hours later he insisted we accompany him to the Jamat, state security office, where I was interrogated by an unfriendly commandant. At least he was unfriendly until I noticed dark bruise patches on his legs and asked him if he had '*Kencing Manis*' (sweet piss – diabetes). Was he thirsty at night? Did he feel faint? Headaches? Dizziness. Instantly he dropped the 'bully in uniform' posture and displayed symptoms of acute anxiety – begging for advice.

Indonesians seem more concerned about their health than any people I have ever met. Every village has dozens of '*dukuns*' or healers. While I was in Myra, I had heard about Brother Bernard (now deceased) from a villager who asked my advice and then seemed disappointed I had no TV antenna to diagnose her condition. 'Brother Bernard had a TV antenna. He knew at once what was wrong with everyone.'

By general acclaim Brother Bernard had been the greatest healer of all times. A German monk, he had made Myra his home for 30 years. As a healer he had two unbeatable allies. Because he was a monk he had a personal help-line to God, and with his portable TV antennae – which he called his radar – he could see right inside his patients. People I met shook their heads sadly. 'No other doctor in all Sumatra has a 'radar' like Brother Bernard.'

At least I had a magnet. Before I left England Doctor Charles had given me one. 'It's great for backache,' he told me, 'And just think how you can impress the locals. Show them how it draws pins and paper clips and then announce how it will draw the pain out of them.' If the British National Health Service ever needed

'*Dukuns*' – Doctor Charles would head the list. He was also a great proponent of urine – especially as a disinfectant. I could just imagine a casualty being wheeled in to hear Charles announce, 'I'm sorry we're out of Dettol but if someone could oblige with a few drops of ....' Perhaps he should set up his own bottling plant. After all it was much the same colour and 'seeing is believing'!

Tuan Arbi followed us around town in order to see what we were buying and scrounge a free lunch. Over it he shared his 'political correctness' with us. In Indonesia this comes under the title of '*Pancasila*'. Tuan Arbi was a deft mouthpiece for his President, picking his teeth and watching slyly for my reaction. 'Mister,' he suggested, (for some reason everyone in Indonesia calls me Mister) – 'Democrasia' he juggled his hands as if it was some invisible ball. 'Why should 51% tell 49% what to do. Here – ' and his hand shot out as if like a conjuror about to magic a white rabbit out of thin air 'Here we believe in consensus.'

Finally we got rid of him so that we could purchase the necessities and have them delivered to the truck, while we searched for bicycles. For Toni this was easy, but for myself I wanted an old-fashioned 28" sit-up-and-beg model. Eventually we found a rusty frame and some wheels. A man promised to assemble them into something rideable and send it on the truck next day.

Eventually it arrived and proved invaluable getting me to settlements along the coast. We painted it canary yellow to match Tuan Arbi and christened it Golkar.

I learned in due course that Toni's father had been the former Kepala Desa until one night while fishing from his canoe out at sea someone smashed his head in. Tuan Arbi's verdict was that he drowned accidentally.

Murders were not infrequent events. They were always attributed to drowning and I was not stupid enough to interfere. No police were ever called and the body was always buried the same day. We had a neighbour who was paralysed and

unable to move. When he was found dead on the river bank, Tuan Arbi announced 'drowning' and had him interred immediately.

Now I began to realise why it was so important to him that a spot had been selected as a safe haven for my mortal remains. In case I ever caused him any trouble!