



Our boat



Sailing



Salur Bridge

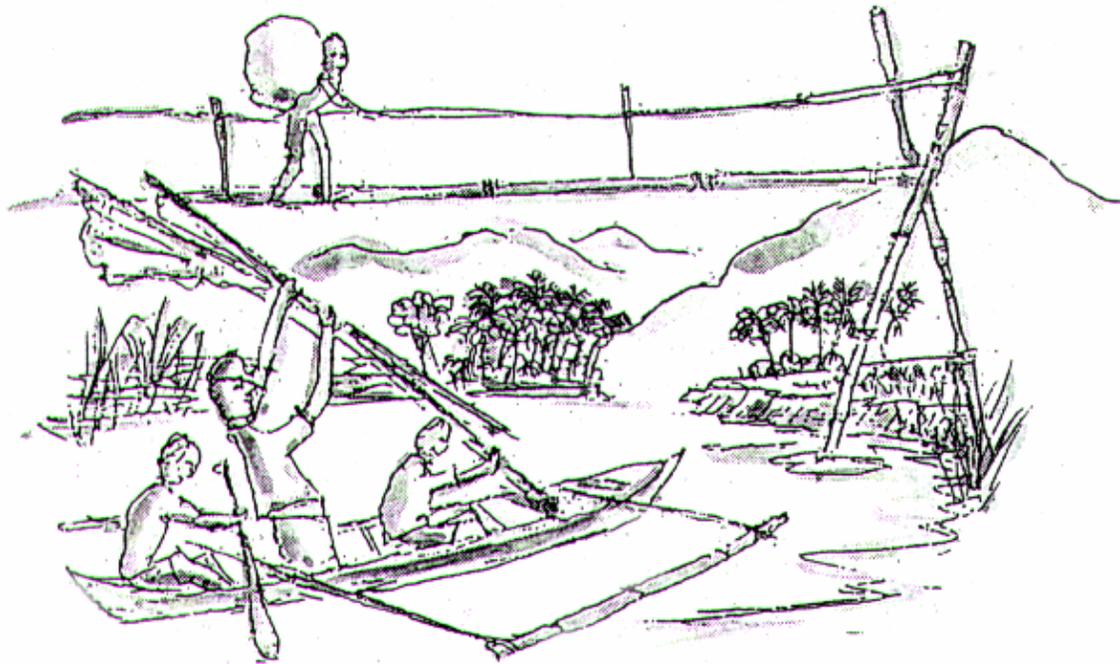
5. THE RIVER

The outer room of the house, facing the river became an improvised surgery and one of my first victims was a fisherman with an abscess on his ankle you could putt a golf ball into. Makmur was also a carpenter and since the falling price of fish was insufficient to support his ever-increasing family he was as keen to sell his outrigger canoe as I was to buy it. Ever since I had seen the valley I was eager to explore up-river.

The canoe was a dug-out, 7 metres long, the sides raised by planks, a tiller set on a frame at the stern and a mast that dropped through a thwart with a notch in the bottom to secure it. Rice sacks stitched together made the sail. The paddles – like the tiller and the mast – were hand-carved. Most dug-outs leak a bit but Toni mixed up some '*damah*' – a sawdust ground from a forest tree with paraffin, to make a black pitch which he spread and pressed into the cracks. With a couple of his friends coerced as extra-paddles we set off.

River winds are governed by 'sod's law' – it always seems to be blowing against you. In theory the wind blew from the *gunung* (mountain) in the morning out to sea taking the fishermen out to the island and bringing them home in the afternoon when it was supposed to blow back up river. As my surgery was in the mornings we were only free afternoons, and usually set off up-river with the wind behind us and the sail billowing. But no sooner had we swept round a few bends – usually when we got to Tuan Arbi's house, the wind spotted us and backed round. Sometimes however luck was with us and we soared along, the crew singing, the paddles laid to rest, whoever was at the tiller straining to keep on course, and whoever held the sail rope trying to judge whether to let it out or haul it in.

Beyond Tuan Arbi's house stood the bamboo bridge. A single bamboo pole spanned the river and everyone but me could hop over with firewood or rice-bags



Down sail!

on their heads. The moment I stepped on, the pole swayed violently and changed me into a cringing coward. I grew to hate that bridge. My attempts to cross it provided a fund of amusement for everyone watching in the nearby rice-fields, and when I invariably toppled off halfway the roar of laughter could be heard for miles.

When we approached sailing full tilt the trick was to lower the sail and mast at the very last minute and then raise them again once we were through – but before the flow stopped us. Frantic paddling always ensued for – especially after rain – the force of the current could be terrific.

Even in the dry season it rained most afternoons and during the wet months the river sometimes surged with such force huge trees torn from the forest were tossed down like matchsticks.

The river was always busy. It wasn't just the fishermen who brought their boats wearily home up-river in the evenings. Sawn planks, cargoes of roof thatch, sacks of milled rice. The river was the key artery of the valley. Along the banks men and boys fished – tossing circular nets into the stream. Water buffaloes romped in the shallows, children splashed and dived. On Fridays whole families dressed in their finest came down to Salur to chant (*sumbayang*) at the Mosque, and then to socialise. When someone died the funeral wake proceeded up-river, carrying the wailing mourners to the house of the bereaved. On either side according to season men and women and water buffaloes worked the rice fields. The river reminded me of Tennyson's 'Lady of Shallot' – the reapers reaping early, the green fields of rice replacing the barley and rye, while 'shallop flitteth' somehow suited the sailing outriggers, when over the growing rice all you could see of them were the white sails gliding up-river like 'swans asleep'.

In the bows of the outrigger lay the medicine box and once this was known we were hailed left and right. Shouting children raced across the fields to hail us –

someone in a farmhouse was unwell and would we come? I got to know the river as much by its currents and its scenery – the bamboo bridge, the four sago palm trees, the thudding rice mill, - as by the patients. Asare with tuberculosis, Wahid – a wizened jester of a man always cadging and laughing. Faudi with chicken pox and a tame white heron, who sold bananas, Er's father with blood pressure so high it went off the scale yet he seemed quite unconcerned, and Amir whose toes I had to cut off with a hacksaw.



6. CUSTOMS

Amir lived beyond the second bamboo bridge a good hour's run up-river. His stilt farm hut was shaded by mango trees. Inside the walls were plastered with ageing newspapers and it was interesting to be reminded of incidents from 10 years ago. Quite why he had gangrene I never discovered; his blood pressure was so low I wondered how it circulated at all, and malaria having selected him for special attention long ago never wanted to leave. He was remarkably patient. Injections of procain penicillin had halted the gangrene but every visit I had to cut out rotting flesh and irrigate wounds with hydrogen peroxide. I had no anaesthetics and when we agreed his blackened toes had to go – his son simply held him steady and I sawed them off.

A few days before I had listened to a programme on the BBC World Service about a famous 19th century surgeon called 'Sawbones' who before cutting off a leg would invite the audience in the operating theatre to time him.

I have rarely seen a house as empty as Amir's – he didn't even have any tea but gave us a hot glass of strained sago-bark before we left. But I have never seen children so beautiful as his little girls in their ragged clothes peeping out curiously from the gloomy back room.

We used to take up food parcels – coffee and sugar, biscuits, tea and even tobacco – although I was waging a losing war on smoking. I thought I'd have to take his whole leg off but the wound healed, and building him some crutches we gradually got him on his feet. It became quite an afternoon ritual visiting Amir. Afterwards we often played volleyball outside or swam in the river before the trip back.

Toni didn't come out any more – he stayed at the house cooking supper. Fish if he could get one – a large fish wrapped in banana leaves and baked slowly over

the embers. Toni was an amazing cook. I loathed using the fire – just trying to boil a kettle and my hands were black as coal. But Toni boiled rice, vegetables, fish, curries and even baked bread – once we had discovered how to, with yeast and flour, and had improvised an oven from an old biscuit tin.

I also used the yeast to try and make some 'home-brew'. The result was a fizzy milky concoction that Rusjad greedily guzzled by the bottleful – conveniently forgetting he was the only '*Haj*' (pilgrim to Mecca) in the village. For this was a strictly muslim community where alcohol was forbidden. On future visits I used to stop-off in Medan and buy a local gin with the attractive brand name *Mansion House*. I put it in plastic water bottles and as it was colourless I could smuggle it past unsuspecting 'religious police' if I was ever stopped. Unfortunately I failed to warn Toni, a mistake I regretted when I found him gasping and spluttering in the kitchen after drinking what he assumed was water. Following that mix-up I labelled my precious reserves of illicit alcohol as 'poison'. Judging by the after-effects perhaps it was appropriate.

Usually my paddles were Er and Hen – Tuan Arbi's son, and sometimes Darius, who seemed quite unimpressed when I told him he had the name of a great Persian king. Anybody who helped could stay for supper so there were usually six or seven, and it was quite jolly. We had to plan meals for after 7 o'clock which was time for evening prayer – otherwise when washing up came round, everyone would skip it on the excuse of their devotionals. I didn't pay my helpers too much – but saved the money instead so they could buy bicycles. A new 'mustang' brand bicycle cost only about 90,000 rupiah, or £25 – and within a month the house was full of bicycles, and bicycles being repaired.

I never fail to be impressed how adept Indonesians are at repairing things. Little children cleverly carved model trucks, using rubber bands for suspension and propelling them with long sticks. Older ones made harpoons from hollow bamboo, the spoke of an umbrella, a long strip of rubber from a bicycle inner

tube – and away they went seeking prawns and crayfish along the shallow creeks.

Close to the house was a mangrove swamp and here were some of the largest komodo dragons I have ever seen. Monitor lizard is the technical name, but only ‘dragon’ or a ‘dinosaur’ illustrates their threatening appearance as they move on their massive squat legs, the long tail following like a shadow while up front a greedy tongue flicks this way and that from a hissing crocodile head. They could move surprisingly fast – scuttling away in an instant, or swimming head breasting the surface like an otter as they crossed the river. The komodos in the swamp could be 8 or 9 foot long and devour anything unlucky enough to fall in their way. We tried keeping hens but gave up – when it just became a case of fattening them not for us but for the komodos. The baby komodos looked quite cute and I fancied keeping a couple in the courtyard – but they were too quick ever to be caught. On the mainland where they were a lot smaller, people set up traps to catch and eat them, but here on the islands – like the wild boars, they were considered dirty and unfit food.

The muslim code on what and what not to eat certainly helped many an animal to survive. In Myra people ate anything that moved: dogs, monkeys, komodos, cats, pigs. Here, when the damage from the boars got too bad hunting parties were sent out to spear them, but if they succeeded the meat was only fed to the dogs. The clove hill behind the house not only housed mean tuskers, but even meaner black apes. Tall, lithe, they ravaged the trees in fruit and had no fear of humans. Snapping and barking they were eager to attack if they thought they could get away with it. But most animals – snakes included – keep their distance unless disturbed and in the evening after coming back down river and while supper was being cooked, I liked to slip away and climb the hill to look out over the green valley, with its scattered clumps of palms and bamboo among the green rice fields. I liked to read that poem by Flecker – ‘Below me in the valley wave the palms, below beyond the valley shines the sea ...’

Coming back to the house I could hear singing. Er was baling out the boat, Hen patched the sail. They were good lads. Out at sea the sun was dropping in a great golden ball – you could almost hear the kiss as it dipped below the horizon. From the low black silhouette of the island the last few outriggers were sailing back on a dying breeze. A young boy's voice sang the call to prayer from the mosque. Dogs barked. Water buffalo moved deeper into the shallows for the night. I heard someone calling from the house that supper was ready and went in.

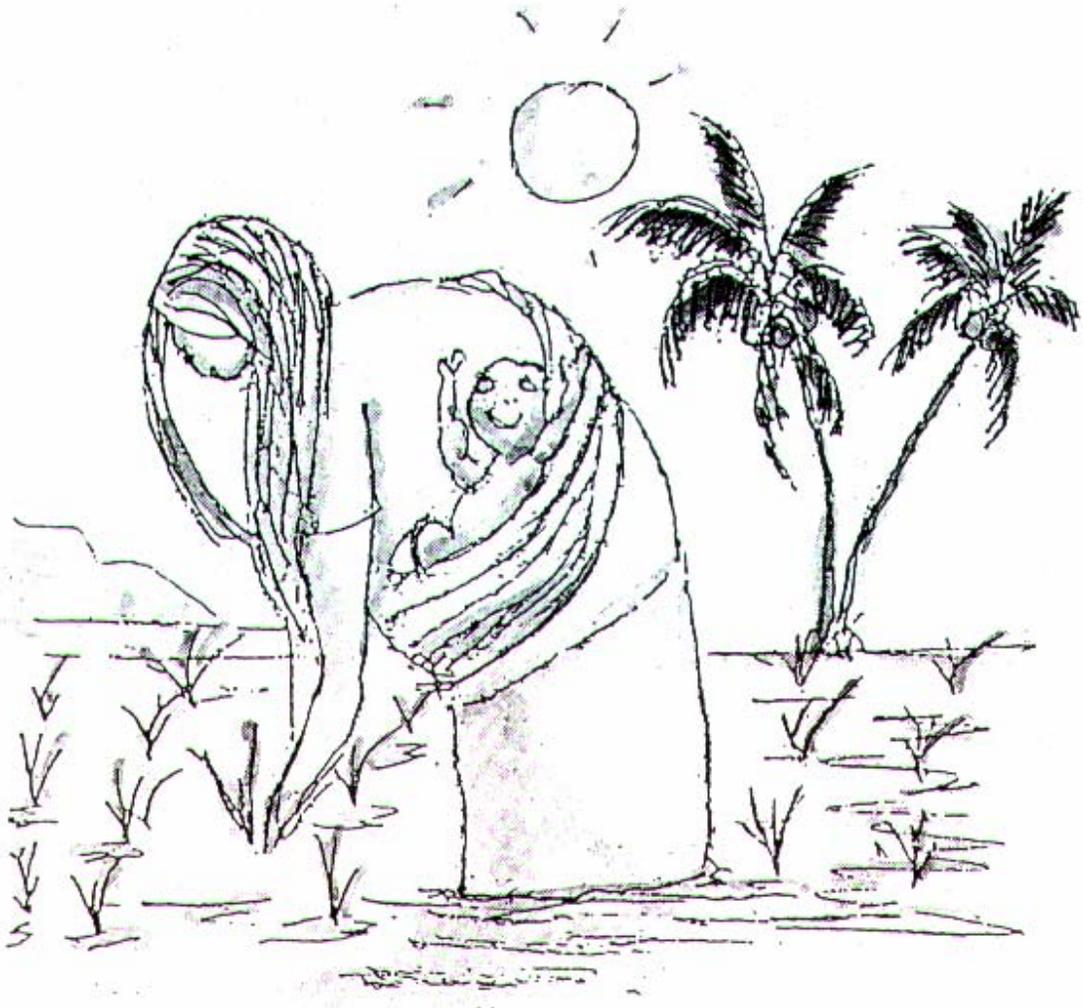
7. RICE

The island calendar followed the rice seasons. Rice in Indonesia has eight names. The green crop growing in flooded fields is '*padi*'. '*Beras*' is brown ears of harvested rice and also when it has been milled. And once it's cooked it turns into a steamy plate of '*Nasi*'. I once met a Canadian missionary working among hill tribes in the Phillipines, he had the difficult job of translating the gospels into tribal language – difficult because, as he explained, there were 13 different names for rice and not one word for love. Many of the millions of Christians in Asia have never seen bread or wine. I wonder if the Lord's Prayer shouldn't be re-worded for their benefit.

In August the stubble fields were dug up by hand – a gruelling, back-breaking job, buried up to your shins in mud and hacking out clods with a mattock. I tried to get into Tuan Arbi's favour by helping – but I think I was more of a hindrance and when I saw my feet covered with leeches I dived in the river and gave up agriculture for good.

In August the rains fall in earnest. Once the fields are ploughed up, herds of water buffalo are let loose and hounded over them until the tiny terraces are turned into pools of mud. Actually I rather enjoyed chasing the buffalo. We got as muddy as they did and joined them later in the river for a wallow and a wash. Once the fields were flooded it was the women's turn to plant the slender young rice plants. And it had to be done properly. If the roots were pushed in bent the plants would wither. The sight of the women planting lines of emerald green rice in the jigsaw of terraced fields – looking like one vast shattered mirror, may have appeared beautiful in a tourist brochure but it was hard work and I was always amazed how they managed to stay so happy, singing and chatting away.

By November most of the fields were planted and there came a pause. During the years I was on the island, ramadan, the fasting month fell in the 'winter'



Rice planting



Rice Fields



Rice Planting