

months, gradually working its way back, a couple of weeks each year. Most of the islanders were devout muslims who took '*bulan puasa*; (fasting month) very seriously. Toni got up at 4 am to cook himself breakfast and then went to the mosque. In fact as I dozed through the grey dawn I was aware that outside everyone was up and about, especially the children, playing and laughing. But from 7 am until the evening prayer call not only eating and drinking were forbidden, but bathing too – in case water was accidentally swallowed. The men were less conscientious about not smoking, but coughing and asthma certainly went into decline. Towards the end of this month the evening prayers got longer and louder until they lasted all night, but finally the slender crescent of the new moon rose into the sky and with a great roar of approval everyone settled down to feast and celebrate the great day – the *Hari Raya*. As with all Indonesian feasts this went on for three days, not one. It's not that Indonesians can't count – just that they don't like to be trapped by the clock. Buses never leave and people never arrive at the time stipulated and if one complains they grin and say '*Jam Karet*' (rubber time). Time is more flexible in Indonesia than elsewhere, and why not.

For *Hari Raya* – the more elderly and hence toughest water buffaloes were slaughtered, and bloody road-side butcheries appeared everywhere. Even Toni's cooking expertise was put to the test trying to tenderize this meat. The best thing to soften a tough stew is green papaya. But it wasn't the papaya season. So we just sat and chewed, and chewed till our jaws ached.

Once Ramadan is over it's back to the fields again – this time to protect the crops from the invasion of small birds, wild ducks and the all devouring pigs. A whole cobweb of poles and flags criss-crossed the fields, with women and children sitting all day in little stilt huts tugging energetically at strings to scare off the flocks. Meanwhile the men were building and repairing bamboo fences to lock out the pigs who liked nothing better than gorging on juicy young rice shoots. I watched the wild ducks, wistfully wondering if we could catch one for supper.



Buffalo





The rice mill

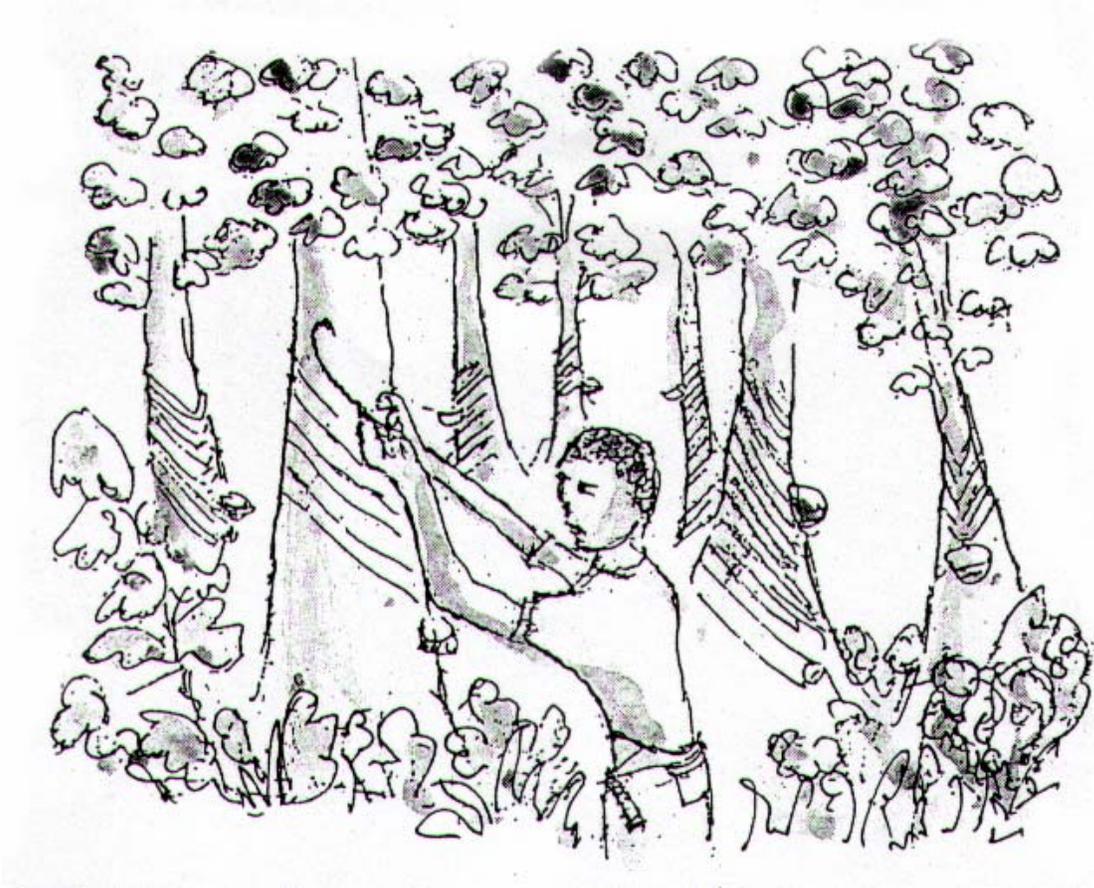
Once we bought a duck but the boy who sold it had neglected to clip the wings, and one glimpse of Toni's kitchen sent it aloft. Rather stupidly it failed to make a bid for freedom but returned to its old duckhouse where the boy clipped its wings and brought it back for Toni to pluck and cook. But despite the curry it was the toughest duck to eat.

About February the rice was harvested – by women with scissors, cutting off the ripe beads and collecting them in a sack. Now too, the little rice mills sprang to life – usually powered by small portable engines, anyone could use them and the owners took payment not in cash but in a cup or two of rice from each sack. The river was busy with canoes laden to the limits with rice going to the mill or coming back. Sadly during the milling process the rice grains are so polished that just about all the goodness – the outer protein and vitamin B get rubbed off. I remembered how in Cambodia the authorities fed the yellow richer rice, that everybody scorns, to the prisoners in jail. It was a hopeless task trying to persuade anyone to sell me rice that had not been too thoroughly milled – they just thought I was mad.

After harvest the fields were left free for the water buffalo to feast on the stubble and give birth to babies. Water buffaloes are usually the gentlest creatures imaginable – judging by the soft imploring noises they make when parted they must love each other and their babies just as much as people do. If the foals were separated from their mothers, they would moan and weep until reunited.

In the valley a person's wealth was counted by the number of water buffalo they owned. Any more than a dozen and you were considered a wealthy man. Goats didn't count. Goats were everywhere and for some odd reason no one ever milked them. It upset me when a woman in her forties gave birth to her 10th or 11th child but didn't have enough breast milk to feed it. Instead they gave it water from boiling rice and it died. 'Why not milk your goats?' I pleaded. But they

thought I was stupid because as everyone knew milk for humans came only in tins labelled 'condensed' or 'evaporated' and few people could afford it.



Rubber tapping

8. KITE FLYING

All over Asia October seems the preferred month for flying kites. In the village it was taken very seriously with cash prizes for those who could fly a kite the highest. Competitions lasted hours if not days. And day and night everyone was busy building the biggest, gaudiest, liveliest kite. The shop supplied thin kite paper, glue and ribbons – the frame was up to you. Mostly the kites resembled strange legendary birds and one almost grew dizzy staring up into the sky where unimaginably high they floated in the thin blue air. In the pursuit and watching kite-flying everything else was forgotten, and even Toni lost track of time and supper was often very late indeed.

A more recent sport was football – but this required a field. Fields were a precious commodity and the only spare one of suitable size was behind the office of the village headman in the middle of a swamp. The problem wasn't so much that it wasn't level but that it was full of bumps and holes of such size the players could lose sight of one another. Then there was the other problem of boots, or the lack of them. Tuan Arbi devised a football competition but economically minded as ever, only bought 11 boots. His theory was you only wore a boot on the foot you kicked with. He also only bought boots of one size. The ensuing game tended to resemble a mad chase. There were no rules except getting a goal. But everyone got gloriously covered in mud, and no one suffered except me – as Tuan Arbi thoughtfully decided I, as foreigner, should have the privilege of buying the cup – but he of presenting it.

It was about this time that local elections took place and much to my surprise I was ordered to go to the mosque to vote.

On the blackboard were chalked a list of names – each name had a number and we were handed slips of paper. Some candidates got up and gave speeches, but as they were in local language I understood not a word. I wasn't sure what to do,

but I needn't have worried as Tuan Arbi sidled up, smiling craftily and borrowed my blank paper. He scribbled some numbers and handed them back. Counting commenced. It soon became clear that those who lost were intended to lose. I was fairly certain I had been used but all Tuan Arbi would say in his closing speech was that we were privileged to be participating in the process of democracy.

February was a month all young teenage boys dreaded. It was circumcision month. This profitable line in surgery was the domain of the *iman* (priest). In fact he had cornered the market in all manner of slaughtering. Even when a hen was to be killed we couldn't do it – Toni had to take it to the iman to have its throat slit. The iman liked to circumsize boys in pairs and then they were left in pairs to commiserate on their pain until things healed. It was not for me – a mere infidel, to criticise but hygiene didn't seem to be a word he'd heard much about, he used fishing twine for sewing up, plus a dab of iodine. I had boys carried into the surgery with terrible infections. They must have been in agony but they were very stoical and rarely complained. Thank goodness for antibiotics – not a medicine the mullah was aware of.

I got my revenge when he had a tooth abscess and I had to drill down through the nerve until I located the pus. No local anaesthetic for you, chum. Plugging teeth was such a daily occurrence I used to line the victims in a row with their mouths wide open – and plug in the tooth cement one by one. Somehow I had mislaid my drill bit and now only had one for all cavities. I tried to remember to rinse it in Dettol before using it on the next victim. Once by mistake I tossed the dirty Dettol out of the window without thinking the drill bit was still in it. I tried not to panic. We'll find it, I insisted, even if the grass was a foot high.

When I was small I was so stupid I was sent to a school psychologist who asked me what I'd do if I lost a pin in a field. I told him I'd buy a new one. From his expression I knew this was not the answer, so I suggested a magnet which

seemed to cheer him up. However the correct answer was to search in ever decreasing circles until the pin was found. When I told my father he decided that if that was the clever answer it was better I stayed stupid. Now I remembered the great man's advice. I marked out a large square, distributed all the scissors I had, plus buckets and ordered all my waiting victims to collect everything. They did and we rinsed it all out – and would you believe it, there like a speck of shining gold was the steel drill piece.

Wahid – the village jester, had a front tooth that wobbled and he wanted it out but was terrified of my touching it. I remembered tooth extraction in the book, 'Tom Sawyer'. We looped a bit of fishing twine round the tooth and tied the other end to the door knob. I told him to close his eyes and slammed the door. To my surprise there was a crash and Wahid rushed out into the village, tooth intact and trailing fishing twine and door knob behind him.

8 SURGERY

It was only to be expected I picked up some of the infections I had to deal with. The house was often full of bawling coughing babies, and epidemics chased through the valley like wildfire – chicken pox, dysentery, cholera, ringworm. Cholera was referred to as the ‘2 Ms’ (*Muntah* – vomit, *Mencerit* – diarrhoea). With almost all ailments the sufferer didn’t die from the disease itself but from the symptoms. Manage to suppress these – keep the fever down, stop dehydration, etc, and antibiotics would gradually kill the cause. I had grown up with a village doctor in England whose all-cure was 6 pints of water a day (plus a dip in the sea). The number of sprightly nonagenarians seemed to bear this wisdom out.

On the island a practical solution was ‘*kelapa muda*’ – young coconut milk, rich in minerals, plus water and a pinch of salt and sugar. It was something any mother in the village could prepare. The main enemy was often complacency – especially among adults. ‘*Imshallah*’ God wills it – I so often heard as a family sat around a relative to show comfort and watch him die when he needn’t have.

I gave out medicines free but even if I didn’t, the cost of saving the life of a child with malaria was no more than a packet of cigarettes – but the father might buy one pill instead of six and smoke his cigarettes – to steady his own nerves, while his child died. Medicines were the very last thing anyone spent money on and even then men came first. Wahid (the jester)’s wife had a bad heart and rheumatism. After a few days Wahid came back for more pills. ‘Did you give her the pills?’ I asked. ‘I gave her one,’ he admitted, ‘I took the rest myself,’ he giggled.

‘But there was nothing wrong with you,’ I protested.

He chuckled again and rolled a twist of tobacco.

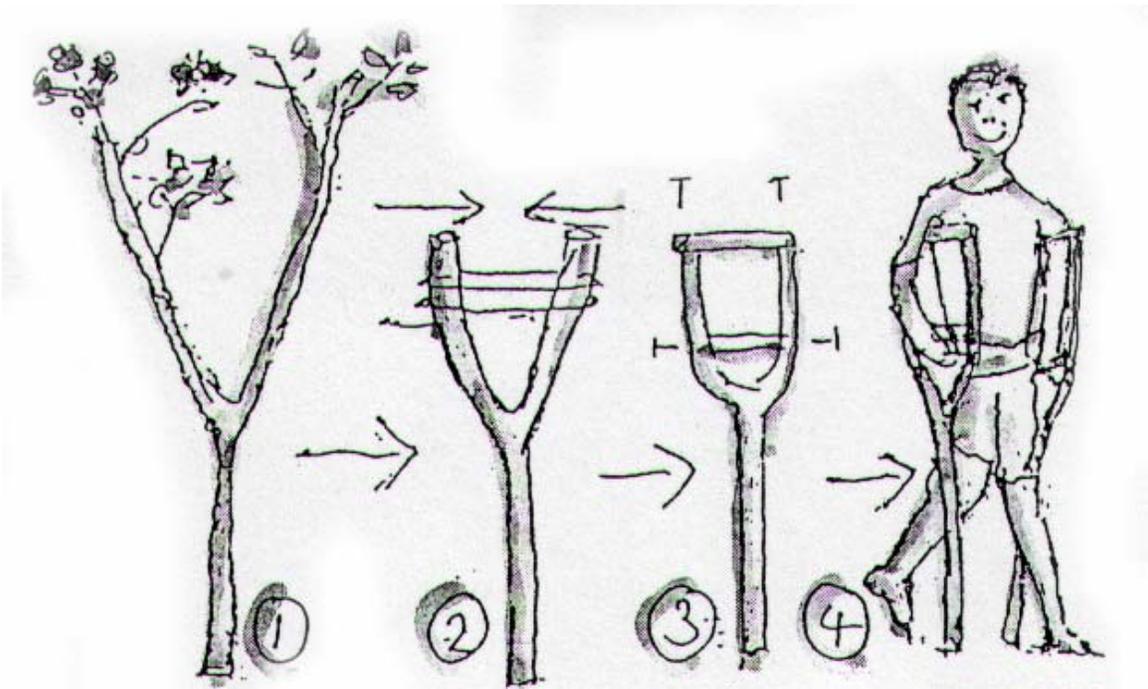
Another nice old man came in with a muscle strain. All I had was old-fashioned Sloan’s linament. I rubbed some on and gave him some to take away. Next day



he was back for more. I was astounded. 'You can't have used it up already. What did you do – drink it?' To my surprise he licked his lips and smiled. 'It was *pahit* (fiery) – but good,' he acknowledged.

I got to know the year by the coming and going of ailments. August, September – when the rains came so did the malaria, then with colder weather followed coughs – especially among smokers. The drier season when the wells were low and people drank dirty water brought cholera. Cholera could kill in hours but if you could just get enough water into someone – keep on pouring it in, no matter how much they vomited until antibiotics took effect they might be saved. The trouble was that the moment I left they stopped the treatment and the patient died. I hated this attitude particularly with children. Once I was called to a village up the coast. A nine year old boy had fallen out of a tree and snapped his hip bone. The family were very poor. The stilt hut had one bare room only. The accident had happened ten days before and now the child had fever. As I strapped his legs together his little body kept twitching. I looked at the fixed expression on his face – his jaws clamped together, with a sense of dread. He couldn't speak but when I touched his mouth and asked 'how long?' he managed to hold up three fingers. I injected everything I had, - penicillin, streptomycin. Only I knew it was no good. His pleading eyes followed my every move. Outside the blue sky was bright with puffy clouds and the breaking seas shone crisply on the reefs. Nature was quite unconcerned at the tragedy being played out in the hut. I gave the boy Diazepan to try to soften the spasms but I knew it was no good. He died at midnight.

I had more luck with Masri. One day his father brought him in by bicycle. His leg stank and when the pus-stained rags were removed the festering wounds looked dreadful. How he hadn't died I never understood. Two years before he had fallen out of a palm tree while collecting coconuts. The local healer just wrapped up the leg and told him it was okay. Soon afterwards splinters of bone pushed out through the skin. His leg had snapped in two places, below the knee and above



Making crutches

the ankle. Both ends now stuck out with rotting flesh all around. Masri stayed with us until I managed to get the wounds to heal. The jagged bits of exposed bone I sawed off. And I made him crutches.

Crutches are quite easy to make. You need a pair of forked branches. Draw in the forks, nail in a couple of cross pieces – one for armpit, one for grip, saw off the stem for size, and a kid who's been crawling for years because of polio is suddenly dancing delightedly down the street.

I was sure that Masri's leg was healing inside and the bones were knitting together. Gradually more splinters came out and over a six month period the wound sealed over. As one leg was shorter, I went on sticking flip-flop soles together until I had built a platform shoe that enabled him to walk evenly. After two years – mostly on a bed in a hut with only a mud floor Masri's leg was very emaciated and even after hopping on crutches he was – as was I – really scared of the day he would actually attempt to walk on both feet – but he did, and nothing broke and my heartfelt thanks was beyond measure.

Rusjad, the schoolmaster, was the biggest hypochondriac I ever came across. Because he controlled my electricity supply I didn't dare tell him so. I told his wife 'the Commandant' and she agreed. Whenever Rusjad wanted attention I was called to the house to find him lying prostrate on his bed or a floor mat, moaning. It was very dramatic – he really should have been on the stage. The trouble was it was difficult to decide what was wrong with him when the signs – blood pressure, temperature, heart beat – were perfectly normal. I was even relieved when I was actually able to diagnose something – malaria, perhaps. Most of the time I had to devise some treatment that looked impressive and cost little. But Rusjad was not easily fooled. He had collected books on medicines and on diseases. He was able to select some rare and little-heard-of ailment, practise in private the symptoms and then treat the Commandant and me to a dramatic



Nancala Mosque

presentation. I had to follow this with an even better performance. Oh, how I wished I had Brother Bernard's TV antenna.

I began this by saying how I picked up infections – but actually the only rash I ever got was a present not from a patient but from the coral reefs. When we had collected half a dozen bicycles – sometimes in the afternoons instead of taking the outrigger up river we biked at low tide along the shore to Nancalla village and beyond, taking a football, or making surf boards out of planks of wood. But I also went on my own in the morning – before surgery, when the day was fresh and bright and sat under a pair of trees that had entwined like a married couple. One was a pandanus – with long spiky leaves. Usually they never grow very tall, but this one was propped up by its partner, a big leafy tree that produced the most exquisite smelling flowers. The two trees were wrapped so tightly together one really felt they were aware of each other – and if anything happened to the one, the other might die of the arboreal equivalent of heartbreak. If I arrived early I found the grass covered with scented blooms, white-petalled with pink insides. Because I never saw them growing on the tree, I wondered if these exquisite blossoms were the product of some magical nocturnal lovemaking.

Just in front lay some splendid coral banks exposed daily as the tide went down. Here and there were pools where it was fascinating to observe the brilliantly coloured tiny fish. In one pool I once saw a clump of darting weed that turned out to be a sea dragon. There were also deep fissures in the reef where one could plunge down into the depths and look for giant clams or moray eels, and other denizens of the deep. The danger with coral is that the beastliest looking things are often quite harmless while the prettier exert a deadly allure. I never discovered exactly what caused my rash – but the stinging was agony and the blisters spread like 'shingles' – but Makmur, the fisherman took one look and informed me it was caught by a strand from a particularly deadly jellyfish and I was lucky not to be completely paralysed. He assured me the only cure – for by now I had exhausted all my own remedies – was to go to a remote islet and

collect the yellow leaves of a mangrove bush with pearly flowers. Our destination was a sort of castaway's desert island and was difficult to land on because of breaking surf all round. However, one afternoon we set off in the outrigger and managed to steer a way between the reefs and beach ourselves safely on the coral strand. It was rather an eerie island – a stagnant lagoon full of dead trees filled part of it. We walked round until we found the mangrove trees and collected a great pile of leaves, but no sooner had we left than a storm blew up. Along the horizon the deadly tail of a tornado snaked towards us and the hissing wind whipped the waves into a frenzy. Within moments the mast snapped and although we tried to make another from the spars the sail ripped and waves swamped the canoe. Everyone was busy bailing but luckily the bamboo outriggers kept us afloat. As fast as it came the tornado vanished, twisting back out to sea and we floundered in to shore.

That evening Makmur ground the leaves into a green paste and spread this all over my rash. Perhaps he should have added a few magical incantations to make it more effective. Anyhow the result was nothing or rather the result was that we had to paddle far up river next day to cut a new mast from the forest and collect rice-sacks to sew together a new sail.

9. JUNGLE

When we had to go upriver to the jungle we made a picnic of it – but invariably, as in England on such occasions, it rained. The river wound up the valley for about 7 miles until the bamboos on each bank bowed so low overhead they blocked our progress and we beached the boat by a pretty little mosque that no one ever seemed to use, and set off along the upper valley on foot. The twists and turns of the river would have made any geographer excited. At one stage it flowed parallel to itself barely feet apart.

The steep mud banks held prisoner giant tree trunks that had washed down and been captured many seasons before. Before the valley finally succumbed to the mighty trees and creepers of the dense rain forest the rice fields ended and herds of water buffalo grazed on the cropped pasture.

Ahead the river rushed out of a boulder-strewn bed with such force we had to cling onto each other to cross, and find a way along the tortuous and slippery bank upstream. Everything here was big and not just the trees. Here leaves were as large as umbrellas, butterflies that spanned two hands, centipedes a foot long, creepers that twirled and whirled like tug of war ropes into the soaring canopy above. After a mile or two we reached a deep pool surrounded by high rocks. Ideal platform for diving while a cauldron of food and rice was stewing over an improvised fire. It was easy to forget we had come here to cut down a mast and some logs to be shaped into paddles.

After a while I decided I should detach myself a little from the proximity of Rusjad and find a second home – or hideaway, in Maudil. This was a house at the opposite end of the village to Masri and the experiment didn't last long for two reasons. Firstly – the entire village moved in to be cured and secondly I went back one day only to discover there was no house. Despite my having paid a rent for three months the owner had decided to move his house elsewhere. All that

remained was a cement floor and a few pieces of my furniture sitting soaking in a downpour. The island was like that. When people decided to move they invariably took their house to pieces and transported it to the new site.



Farmhouse

10. EXPEDITION

One weekend we all decided to cycle up the coast and see if we could reach Kampong Air – the island's 'Second City', 70kms north. This doesn't sound difficult, but the track was awful. Either it was all rocks or it was soft sand. There were three steep hills to climb, and as Indonesian brakes never work we agreed to walk the bikes down – all except Er who was last seen careering out of control to his doom, and was picked out of a gully with, fortunately, no serious damage to himself but unfortunately minus one pedal. Somehow we managed to jam the pedal back on and continued. Because we had set off before dawn we hoped to reach K.A. in one day. Er's mishap put us back but we arrived at the crocodile river late morning. The boatman seemed to be missing – eaten possibly, but we finally roused him and ferried the bikes over. After that there was a long, hot, never-ending slog through soft sand, hour after hour, interrupted by punctures, chains falling off and one more river where we pulled ourselves over on a raft. About 5 pm we pedalled wearily into K.A.

The whole town seemed to be flying kites and the only place to stay was the filthiest hole imaginable – the bed sheets couldn't have been changed in a year. You could see the fleas jump. I would have hitched up my hammock in a wood but Indonesians are scared of ghosts and I couldn't very well desert the party. The only place to wash and toilet was a well surrounded by a low screen. It never occurred to me that this was the well for the entire town. Stark naked I was rinsing myself down when the village maidens marched in to get water. All rather embarrassing.

A mile from the small town a path led to an inlet where the ferry from Salur docked if the tide was in.

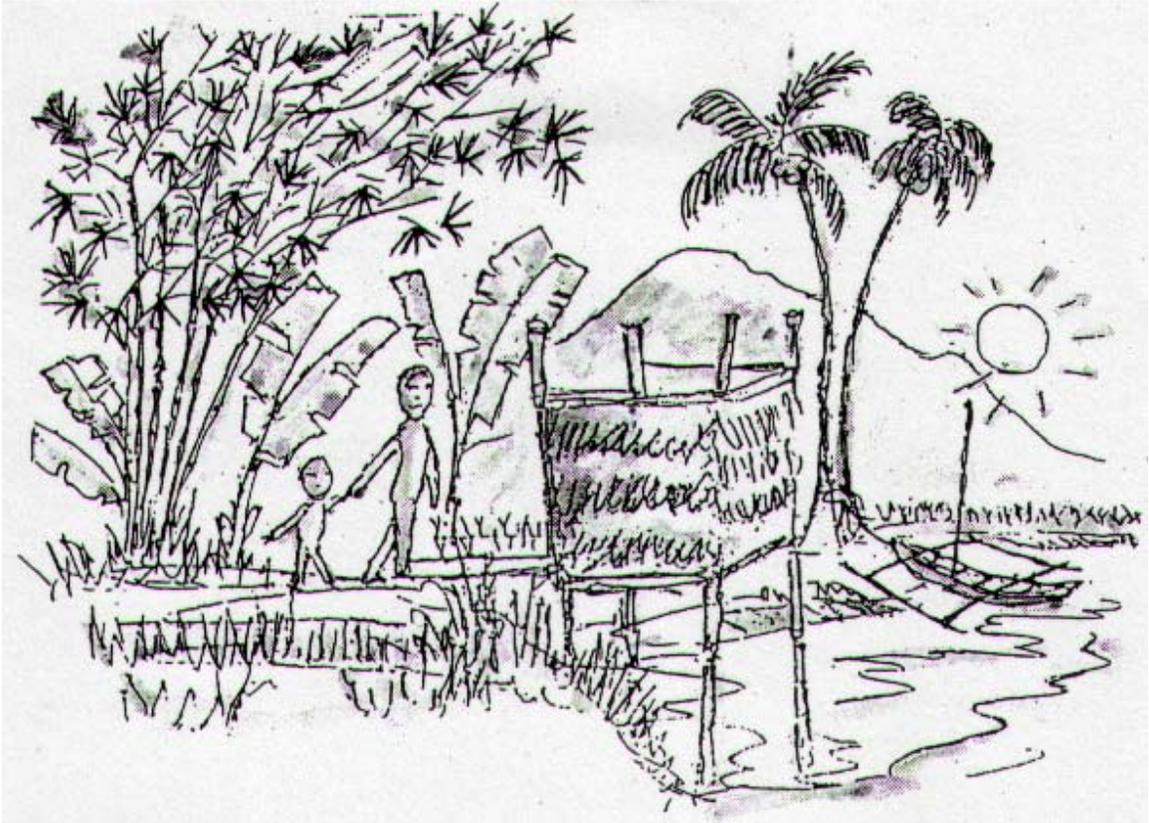
Next morning we set off on the return journey but we were weary and the day was long. Er's pedal kept falling off and then by luck we came upon – in the

middle of nowhere – a blacksmith who welded it secure. All this took so long that it was near evening before we reached the crocodile river. We cooked supper on the beach but my friends were too scared of ghosts to stay outside. They sought shelter in the village nearby and I stretched out on the shore and waking sometimes watched the night stars shift across the heavens. At dawn my friends found me, and although there was only water and cold rice to swell our hungry bellies, we set off again. The day was so hot that at one stage we crawled down a well in a disused cemetery just to cool off, but finally we crossed the three hills. These past, we were on the homeward stretch, stopping at Maudil for coffee and biscuits and Salur by nightfall. So ended our expedition up the island.

Whenever I pedalled along the coastal path I came on people straining to heave along huge sago palm trunks – using little but levers, rollers and their own brute force. One was reminded of ants struggling to bring home a beetle to the larder. Once it reached its destination the trunk was plundered, its bowels scraped out, sifted and strained until like gold dust panned from a dirty stream the harvest of their labours was finally collected and pressed into dough and stored.

Apart from coconut palms the sago were the most important trees. The trunks provided food and the fronds were woven into *Atap* (roof thatch). We were always needing palm thatch either to repair the roof or build outhouses such as toilets. The islanders were very casual about toilets or *jambans*. These were generally built over river banks – little palm-thatched huts reached by a plank. And after a squat the river current washed away the results. These riverside loos were so deficient in thatch as to render the occupant entirely visible. I preferred more privacy. Privacy required thatch – lots of it.

In Myra on the mainland the Batak people didn't need *jambans*; they just squatted in the stream. The river may have cleaned them off – but they didn't clean the river – particularly when just downstream in the shallows the village women did their washing and naked infants swam. Unfortunately despite my



Jamban toilet

criticism of these habits it wasn't long before I adopted them – except I made sure my selected spot for the morning ablutions was higher upstream than anyone else.

11. PROBLEMS

In Salur Rusjad decided on a personal fitness campaign. Mornings he took to trotting along the river bank – so long as there was a crowd on hand to applaud. Unfortunately he took things further than necessary. A rice sack was filled with sand and hung from a tree outside his porch for a punch bag. Rusjad emulating a prize fighter danced and pranced around the punchbag jabbing and fending to the cheer of onlookers. '*Pukul, pukul, pukul* (hit, hit, hit)' roared the spectators. Rusjad raised a hand in salute and then drawing it back swung the blow of his life. The punchbag scarcely moved but Rusjad leaped back clutching his fist and yelling in anguish before falling flat as if knocked out for the count. His wife the 'Commandant' helped carry him in.

Rusjad took to his bed suffering all the strains, pains and ruptures known to his medical book. The electric current joining us was switched off until I came to his bedside to commiserate and to cure.

Sadly as time passed Tuan Arbi became more demanding. He no longer asked if he could borrow money. He arrived with a loan note already written out – with the date for repayment. I came to dread his visits. Employing Hen, his son, seemed no security. And the more Arbi's unpaid loans mounted I wondered anxiously how it would be resolved. I knew that the best way not to have to repay would be to get rid of me!

Although the village was detached from much of the outside world – and there were times walking along the shore I felt as if I was the first man standing on the first untrodden beach, yet there was no shutting off the rising turmoil from the country at large.



Waterfall

The currency suddenly plunged in value. Student demonstrators in Jakarta demanded Suhaidi's resignation. Aceh rebels demanding independence stepped up their campaign – attacking military convoys, destroying installations. Foreigners were no longer welcome.

One day Tuan Arbi dressed in his yellow uniform arrived with two policemen. The house was searched and everyone was questioned. Was it true I had been spreading religious and political dissention? – encouraging Christianity, blaspheming against the blessed name of the prophet Mohammed, talking about communism and corruption. The charges went on and on.

I was barely given time to pack and less to say goodbye. I was escorted to the ferry and watched the island grow smaller over the stern rail. I had been there three years.

The ferry brought me back to Myra, where I rented a house by the sea. A Chinese lad, Azril, was my cook. We built a boat to get out to the palm islands in the bay. I set up a surgery as before and when I had free time I climbed the forest and the waterfalls. The Nias people mostly worked as rubber tappers, but the land belonged to the Bataks. The two communities lived on opposite sides of the river. The Muslim fishermen dwelled in stilt huts on the shore.

Once Suharto had been deposed there was little peace. One day a Muslim mob stoned the house. I told Azril to throw everything he could in the boat and we managed to row up river to the Christian enclave before the mob reached the road bridge to head us off.

These incidents flare up one day and are forgotten the next. A few days later I ventured back to the shore and discovered my possessions distributed around the houses. My bicycles, repainted, here, a doormat there. I had owned the only electric iron. Indonesian irons usually are heated by burning coconut husks. Now

I noticed that the lady who took in laundry had newly painted 'electric ironing' onto her sign. When she saw me she was clearly embarrassed. 'Mister, if you ever want any ironing done, it's free.'

Fortunately possessions haven't meant much to me, and I haven't been in the sort of places where you need or acquire many.

Every Indonesian village has someone who makes or sells ice. It usually arrives in a block strapped on the back of a bicycle, and you buy a sawn off piece – which is enough to keep perishables safe for a day. At night there's usually a breeze so a fan is not needed. Despite being on the equator Myra was cool at night. Even cooler was its neighbour Myra Dola – perched on top of the mountains soaring along the coast.

We sometimes went up taking medicines. We also took a guitar or two, a couple of hens, rice and a gallon of 'tuak' (fermenting palm wine). At 5000 ft, Myra Dola was quite a stiff climb. The village was scattered but there were some communal huts – although sleeping in them was 'bedlam'. Bataks get a lot of pleasure strumming guitars and singing except even their jolliest songs sound so mournful you want to weep. But if anyone thinks a tribal hut is romantic – imagine being confined with your noisiest neighbours for a night or two. At least I could escape outside and sleep in a hammock. Although it was cold – and unknown crawling insects dropped unexpectedly onto your face – anything was better than the din inside, and for reward the stars shone brilliantly overhead.

I wonder if village headmen are all lookalikes. The genial old fellow who had been Myra's headman for years dropped down dead and a sinister replacement named Kondra took over. He made straight for my door and I paid him off. Kondra was Batak and I lived among the Nias people on the other side of the river. A few months later fights broke out. Everyone possessed machetes. They are the ideal tool for cutting wood, chopping down coconuts and hacking your

enemy. Mobs of batak youths in red headbands manned barricades across the coast road.

Nias people are easily identified by their pale skins and high cheekbones. There were a lot of casualties. I know because I had to sew up the wounded. The dead they buried at once.

Although I lived in the village now it was such a noisy place that I often slept in the forest, taking my hammock up to the waterfall. I also built a small stilt hut to retire to. Sometimes I slept in it, but I never felt as safe as I did in the forest. Indonesians don't venture into the forest at night as they are scared of ghosts.

One night while I was sleeping in the forest my hut was burned down. Next morning when I returned everybody in the village rushed to tell me. They were surprised to see me. It was assumed I had been burned to death inside. Later on some of Kondra's cronies arrived. They were armed and drunk. They clubbed Azril and started on me. A women rushed in. 'If you kill him,' she shrieked, 'his ghost will haunt the forest and nobody will dare work there!' Reluctantly the men lowered their machetes. 'Give us everything you've got,' they demanded, 'And GO!'
