



Palembang

Sree Kumar



Palembang: The Malay World

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Photo essay of a trip to Palembang in 2007.

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# South Sumatra Wedding





Arrival of the bride and groom





Waiting guests; Arrival of VIPs















VIPs, top; Dancers and guests, below



Guests, left; Dancers, right



Bride's mother, top; Fan dance, below







Relatives, left; Bridesmaids, right



# Malay Village Life





Houses on the river; Children on the verandah



Grandmothers



Boatman, top; River house and market seller, below





Market sellers





On the river



Ferries, top; Left bank, below



Houses on the river



Malay water village





Water village shop, top; Mosque, below







Water village house, top, and below left; Cart, below right





Ferries





Alleyway, left; Bananas, right



Market workers, left; Tea-break, right

# The Town







Mannequins and shopkeepers, left; Malay shop, right





Vegetable seller, left; Bargaining, right





South of the river















Dutch commercial quarter



Godowns and quay



Commercial quarter





Hokkien temple



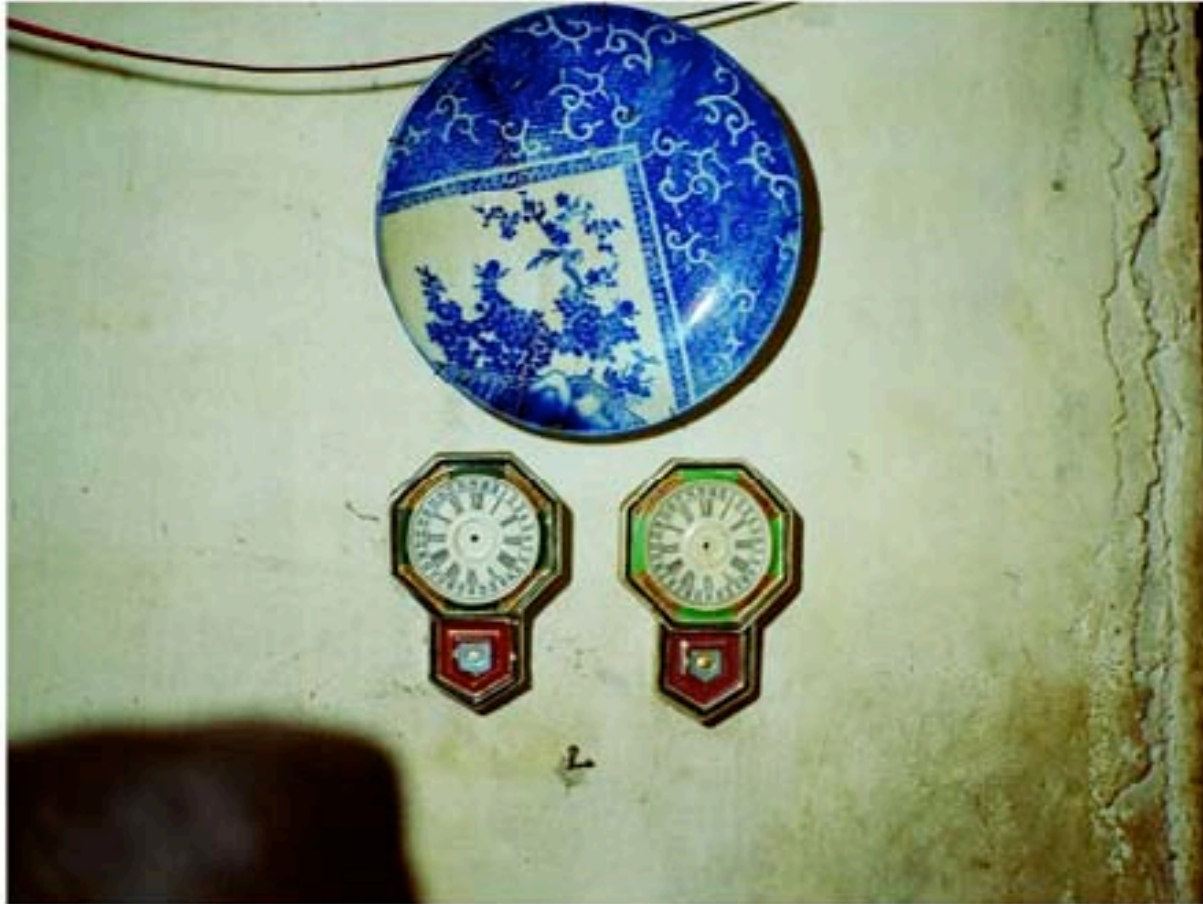


SINAR PUSPITA  
PALEMBANG





Antiques



Antiques, top; Arab quarter, below



Old school





Out of Town







Beans and gourd, left; Ginger, right





Pineapples and lime, left; Chillies, right





Fish, top; Chillies and ginger below left, Plastic products below right





Rural houses







Rural scene



Rice fields



Upstream, top; Houses, below





Inside a rural house





Kitchen items, left; Living room, right















Village lane, top; Banana groves, below left; Children, below right



Looking for work, left; Edge of the village, right



Rural wedding preparations, top; Village lane, below left; Village shop, below right







Rubber bales, below left; Boys in the pool, below right





Malay lady in traditional dress

## Finding the Malay World

The flight from Singapore left at an early hour. It was full. Almost all the passengers were Chinese Indonesians returning from their shopping and medical trips. The journey was short: within an hour we were already landing in Palembang. I could see the wide expanse of the brown river beneath and the large tracts of green further up. A mosaic of red roofs appeared in the near horizon. Then, in a swift movement, the aircraft banked and landed. In the terminal the immigration officials could not believe that two tourists had arrived, for Palembang is seldom on the tourist trail.

Palembang, today, is an oil town. The state oil company has been pumping oil from the jungles of South Sumatra for decades and, before that, the Dutch were doing the same with Standard Oil of New Jersey (today's Esso). The housing for the oil company workers is set in a magnificent tree-lined part of the town. It would seem that this has become an expatriate haven just like the many other oil towns in Indonesia. But this is to miss the point. Palembang has a long history and the discovery of oil has overtaken its other importance, only for a while. While expatriates may find Palembang just another posting, for the locals it is a melting pot of culture, ethnicity, religion and social interaction.

At the hotel, the Malaysians were in full force. Large Malaysian companies had taken over the vast stretches of green in South Sumatra and converted them to the new oil industry, palm oil. Here, in this French-owned hotel they had taken refuge to enjoy the weekend and to carouse. During the weekday they would be in the far distances away from Palembang, tending to the factories and the oil palm estates. No sooner than I had checked-in and had a short nap to recover from the early flight, I was ready to explore the town and its environs. This was, after all, the Palembang that I had read in my school history books.

The town is an expanse of red tin roofs dotted with flat grey ones and set around the banks of the vast Musi River. The left bank is hilly and it is here that the Dutch built the commercial centre and their own quarter of tree-lined houses and neat avenues. The esplanade and the old palace, now a military headquarters, stand next to the commercial centre of the town. The river washes along the side of the esplanade, boats bobbing in the brown water. In the hot glare of the morning sun, I can see little ferries darting from one side to the other. In the distance is the landmark of Palembang, the red bridge, *Jambatan Ampera*, that joins the left and right banks across the wide expanse of the river.

On the esplanade, meanwhile, a wedding is underway. I arrive just as the groom, the bride and her entourage are being received and taken to the dais. The bride is, simply, beautiful. She wears an ornate gold headdress and is dressed in a gold patterned red silk Malay *baju* embroidered with gold trimmings. She has several gold ornaments hanging on her bosom. The groom has a less elaborate gold *songkok* on his head, and wears a red silk coat with a gold border. He has a set of embroidered red silk bands across his chest to complete the picture. They are both wearing white flowers around their neck. The bridesmaids are dressed in the same colours but with less jewellery. A large tent has been set up and there are hundreds of guests already sitting inside. Big fans are placed along the sides to cool them. The heat and humidity is simply overbearing. The bride's parents soon take their seats on the dais. The bride's mother is equally beautiful. In a few moments the proceedings begin. There is a short announcement and a dancer, in an elaborate costume, takes to the floor and does a

traditional welcome piece. Music for the dance blares from a bank of loudspeakers on the other side of the tent. Several other dance pieces follow. There are different dance troupes waiting in the wings to perform. The dancers are all young, vivacious and pretty. Just before noon, there is a short break in the dance routine and several of the important dignitaries say a few words to the gathered crowd. Lunch is then served and the bride's mother invites me to join them. I have a soft drink and a piece of cake with some of the guests and then find my way out of the tent. The guests, meanwhile, have started to gorge themselves on the wedding spread being served. There are different types of cakes, fried and curried chicken, yellow rice, fish prepared in different styles, lamb curry, a selection of vegetables and a variety of soft drinks. Soon the crowd will thin and the couple will leave. But the festivities will go on through to the evening: this is a society wedding in Palembang.

The Malay quarter is on the right bank, with houses on raised platforms. Most of these houses face the river or are on creeks that flow into the river. There are little lanes and dirt tracks that criss-cross the area. A small mosque stands cheek by jowl next to a row of wooden houses. Almost all the buildings in the quarter are made of wood. The weather has taken its toll on most, leaving the wood exposed, cracked and, in places, with large holes. The windows are curtained and tied at the sides, to let in the light. Many have colourful lace curtains, a common feature of most Malay homes.

There are children everywhere with their grandmothers, standing in doorways. There is an atmosphere of a large extended family, here in the Malay quarter. This place is not on the tourist's trodden path. Visitors are unheard of, so I become an object of curiosity. Women peek through curtained windows and children run out to the stairs to watch me walk through the lanes. In the drier patches there are rambutan and banana trees providing some shade on this hot and humid day. Children run in front, laughing and gesticulating. The men gather to see the visitor and shake his hands. There is a friendliness in these parts. The lane leads to a small mosque and further on, I reach the edge of the river where boats are tethered. Next to this little quay is the local produce market.

At this late hour of the morning the market has become quiet. The stall keepers have cleared their stock but there are a few still open for business. The fruit stall is filled with different types of bananas, while the fish monger is selling off the last of his catch. In the strong sunlight there is the sharp smell of rotting vegetables and fruit, infused with that of salted fish. The stall keepers have, in the meantime, gathered around a shop to have coffee and cigarettes. Their faces tell a fascinating history of Palembang. There are traces of Chinese, Arab, and Indian features grafted onto Malay faces. The hundreds of years of miscegenation brought about by travellers and the different civilizations continue to show in the faces of the people here. Palembang was for centuries a melting pot, first with the Hindu-Buddhist Srivijaya kingdom and, after its decline, with the onslaught of Arab traders who came to participate in the trade fostered by the Malacca sultanate. The different waves of conquerors and traders all left their mark in the people. This practice continued during the Dutch colonial period which, in Palembang, began in the early 1800s. So the occasional blue-eyed local is not a surprise.

On the left bank, the buildings are newer. There are no houses on stilts. The land is hilly. The market here is different: it is a purpose built breeze block that accommodates several small stalls and a variety of shops. In one, a row of mannequins, parading the hijab in a hue of colours, faces the road. Three men sit in front of the shop, adding their faces in contrast to that of the dolls. In another, there is an array of coloured textiles and lace cloth. Further down, is a shop displaying small bottles of perfume from Arabia. Turning a corner I

see an old Chinese man sitting outside a shop, selling packets of biscuits, sweets and bread. On the side of a building, a woman is haggling with a man hawking fermented soya briquettes. There is a constant sound of motorcycles going through the little road that cuts through the stalls. There are women in colourful hijab going in and out of shops, carrying plastic bags.

Facing the main road and the old mosque is an Indian muslim restaurant that serves a watered-down version of *murtaba*, the flat Indian bread stuffed with meat. The owner tells me that his father and grandfather came from south India, but he was born in Palembang of a Malay mother. The dislocation of the links with Malaya and India over the last several decades has muted the usual movement of Indian muslims in these parts. In response the cuisine and habits have become more localized. Dilution and local tastes have taken over, and intermarriage with indigenous people have further eroded culinary styles. So Palembang has Indian food, but it is nothing like that seen in the other parts of Southeast Asia or India.

The Dutch quarter has broad tree-lined roads with colonial houses set in little gardens. There is a gentrified feel to the place. In the colonial days it must have been a handsome place to live in. Today it is occupied by Indonesian civil servants and the buildings have begun to show the usual disrepair. Just outside the Dutch quarter is a Chinese temple, well-kept and tended to by a couple of women. I am welcomed to enter and enjoy the cool interior where the central altar and deities are placed. This is the first time they have seen Indians in their temple. Here, outside the old Dutch quarter and leading to the river, the wealthy Chinese of Palembang have their homes. Many others live in the other desirable parts of the left bank.

In a nearby school the old watchman shows me around and tells me that it was built in the early 1900s by the Dutch. The architecture is in tune with the climate of the region. There are wide corridors to shade the rooms from the hot sun and to keep the rains away. The steep roofs ensure that the monsoon rains are washed to the ground as rapidly as they fall. The air is cool in the corridor. In the compound there is a large mango tree throwing its shade across the sandy playground. The school has stood for almost a hundred years; nothing is built like this anymore.

Next to the main mosque is the Arab quarter and here, in a row of old low-roofed buildings, are a few antique shops. One of the shops has a small door and in what used to be the living room is every conceivable collectible lying around in a haphazard fashion. There are old clocks, wooden boxes and an old "Pye" radio among the various items. An old man, the owner of the antique shop, turns up soon after. He must have been watching me from the other side of the road. In a dark inner room, which was the kitchen of old days, a single light bulb throws enough light to show up a huge trunk and an open cupboard filled with china, metal statues and daggers. The owner speaks in Bahasa Indonesia. He must be seventy or more years old. He opens the trunk and shows his collection of rare Palembang and Jambi batiks which he has collected over several decades. Many of the designs and the weaves are now not available. He has rare Ming china, and a statuette of a dancing Siva from the Srivijaya period. He trades only in US dollars but I am rupiah rich and dollar poor, leaving me with no chance of settling on a deal.

The road away from town and into the highlands is pregnant with traffic. This is the same road that leads to Jambi. But we will be turning off before the road goes off into the jungles and the hilly terrain beyond. Soon after, we leave the river and head inwards through verdant countryside. There are fruit trees and fields on both sides. We pass houses of various sizes, all built on raised platforms. Some of them have converted their basements for storage. The tiled roofs are steep: the monsoons can be unpredictable here. There are the occasional small stalls with pineapples being displayed for sale. There is no one tending to them. A can is left on the side to deposit the money for fruit taken from the stand.

In the town of Pangkalanbalai the morning market has just opened. There are women selling ginger, pineapples, beans, cucumber, jackfruit, limes, and all manner of other fruits and vegetables. Some have their produce laid out on mats on the ground, others stand behind stalls. In an inner row are several open-air stalls selling fish. Leading away from the market is a row of mats displaying plastic pens, pencils, cups and plates for sale. In another area of the market several varieties of salted fish are being displayed on woven mats and the air is pungent with its smell. There is a feverish atmosphere here, of people bargaining, buying and selling. In a short time the heat and humidity has risen and the perspiration soaks through my shirt.

Soon we reach the town of Talang Anyar, having passed through formerly lawless towns. These are the foothills. From here, the road to the west climbs into the mountains and goes on to Bengkulu in the south and Padang in the north. We travel alongside the upper reaches of a river and pass rice fields. In a clearing off the road are bales of raw rubber floating in the water, for this is a rubber growing area. There are also acres of fruit trees and sugar cane on the sides of the road. Beyond a bend are large pipes running across the land and through forests. These are gas pipes, transporting natural gas from the rich fields of South Sumatra to stations at the river mouth and near Palembang. Further on, we come across a landing strip set in scrubland: a private airstrip owned by one of the Malaysian plantation companies.

Later in the day we reach a rural village which survives by growing rubber and tending fruit orchards. The road passes through desolate rubber plantations and spills out into an open, water-logged area where the village is situated. The houses are built on stilts to keep away the floodwaters during the rainy season and the wild animals at other times. This is our driver's village and his mother gets busy preparing tea. The house, in typical Malay fashion, has a linoleum floor, curtained windows and a cupboard displaying various memorabilia and old ceremonial costumes. His grandfather was a minor official of the court and his regalia has been passed down the line. The kitchen is clean and well kept. There are various woven baskets hanging on a wall while a kettle of water is brought to boil over a charcoal fire. The open airy windows, with vertical wooden bars acting as a sort of protection, provide a gentle coolness throughout the house.



In a well next to the house, two women are busy bathing and washing clothes. The cemented lane through the village passes through small shops and clearings of banana groves. Wooden ladders lead to the main door of some of the more simple houses. Sawn timber is stored in the open areas underneath the floors . There are children playing in the dry ground. In one compound a wedding feast is being prepared by women. They wave and beckon me over to take their photograph. In another, a group of men sit around waiting for work. There are chickens and ducks scratching for worms in the dirt under the houses. A small mosque stands to one side of the lane. A hollow log with a wooden beater hangs outside it. The beating of the log signals the faithful to prayer.

It is almost nightfall when I return to the outskirts of Palembang. At this point, we meet the river again. My driver tells me of a family that can speak to crocodiles, here. It is a gift inherited from their ancestors, the palace soothsayers. But it is too late in the evening to meet them. I will have to come another time to fulfill this wish. This, is the true Malay world: the world of crocodiles, of *buaya*. For the Malays, the crocodile has strange powers and, in their world, the creature is often revered.

I had come to see Palembang but found a treasure of the Malay world: of riverine and rural houses; of people of different ethnic confluences; of the melding of cuisines; of the social interaction in markets; of rare antiques; of rural Malay life; and the knowledge that it is all going change in my lifetime. I can only mourn its passing when that happens.

*Sree Kumar*  
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### **About the photographer**

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and essayist. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.