

A Memorable Lunch:

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The numerous uninhabited islands of the South China Sea have long been the hunting grounds of a nomadic group of people, known as Orang Laut (Men of the Sea) in Malay, and as Sea Gypsies by the popular press. Anthropologists prefer the term Sea Nomads. In four decades of exploring these waters in my yacht I came slowly to know many of them, to be privileged to be able to help them out on numerous occasions. On one occasion I allied myself with them in a potentially violent encounter with oppressors (see “A Small Battle won”), and in later years I was able to comfort myself that I and my vessel were of good enough repute amongst them that I might rely on their expert help freely given should I ever find myself in a nautical emergency out there.

This tale is of a minor, early encounter with the Orang Laut, before I knew much about them, and one which was to have a felicitous sequel a whole decade later.

My ketch “Four Friends” was anchored off Tokong Kemudi, a scenic, apparently uninhabited island in the middle of the South China Sea. We were on a long voyage home to Singapore from the other side of Borneo, where we had been filming with the BBC (see “Forgotten Voyage”), and were running low on provisions.

My sole crew-man, Jaji Biri, had swum to the island’s reef with his mask and hand spear, looking for something for lunch. Jaji is a Bajau, one of the Samal Bajau ethnic group, Sea Nomads from the Sulu Islands, and a superb breath-holding diver (see “A Simple Diving Bell”), so I was confident we would eat well that day.

Jaji came swimming back towing his half blue barrel, a measure to avoid attracting sharks with bleeding fish. I looked eagerly inside the barrel to see two large lobsters...my favourite seafood, although I knew Jaji found them tasteless. Jaji related how there were some people ashore living in shacks amongst the coco-palms, and that two small children had helped him guard his barrel while he dove to find four lobsters in the bones of the “Java Trader”, in those days a very conspicuous wreck near the beach, since reduced to a few fragments at low tide. I suspect Jaji concentrated on lobsters for my sake, rather than real food, such as Snapper or Grouper, although they too are considered bland when fresh, for the only true seafood for these Men of the Sea comes long cured with a patina of salt. He left two lobsters for his young assistants.

We boiled one lobster, the head, by choice, for Jaji, and the “tasteless” tail, by choice, for me. Jaji ate first, with rice, while I defrosted and started to bake the last French baguette, and found a solitary bottle of cheap, duty-free white wine in the freezer. This had the promise of a great lunch!

I was still waiting for my sitting when a man and small child arrived alongside in a tiny dugout canoe, bearing a gift of coconuts. I thanked him and he invited himself on board.

Orang Laut with children at Tokong Kemudi. Bones of Java Trader in background



He was a villainous looking fellow, wizened, sun-blackened, with his unkempt hair standing on end, and a gaping mouth with an irregular phalanx of gnarled, discoloured ivory. He made an ostentatious show of handing over four green coconuts.

In the meantime, my boiled lobster tail was sitting, au mayonnaise, on a plate in the galley being devoured by a swarm of black flies that seemed to arrive with our visitors. My French baguette was rapidly browning in the oven, by the aromas that issued therefrom, and my bottle of vin de table Longchamps was now quickly chambre-ing in the noonday tropic air. I was anxious about the fate of my lunch, but constrained to be polite.

Fortunately my visitor understood Indonesian, so we exchanged pleasantries. I enquired of the small perahu I had seen setting out under sail, earlier that morning. "Whither bound?" "Ah," said the visitor, "for Pinang Seribu, in the Badas Islands, near Tambelan, for supplies, since our island is out of rice."

"Ahh!" said I, sensing a way of easing our friends politely away so that I could address my fast disintegrating lunch. "We have rice, you must take some!" Jaji hauled out a ten catty bag of Thai rice. The guest affected to be covered in confusion. "Very shy!" he said (although that word 'malu' can mean embarrassed as well), but since I "had raised the subject, perhaps a little paint for my perahu, it is leaking badly, red colour preferably" We found him a pot of yellow, fortunately his second choice. I carried rice and paint onto the deck to help hand it down to him. He scrambled rapidly down into his tiny boat to stow his goodies, but just as rapidly up again to rejoin his little daughter (or grand-daughter?)

I mentioned that I had some work to do. "Please go ahead, do not worry about us!" exclaimed my guest, son of a long tradition of communal living, unconstrained by notions of personal privacy.

Jaji had now taken the baguette out of the oven, and placed it with the lobster and the flies. "Captain, you should eat, never mind the visitors." Jaji was conscious, even more than I, of the universal custom in Asia that one does not eat in front of others without ostentatious offers to join in, usually delivered three times, so that onlookers can refuse twice in perfect courtesy, and then shyly accept the third time, if they be truly hungry. But since we had nothing to offer them that would be palatable to their tastes, and very little else to spare, he felt that this was a different occasion.

Shamefacedly, I announced "Ma'af! (forgive me!) I am going to eat now!" My guest, ever obliging, said, "Please go ahead", and repeated it twice again, explaining, "We have already eaten, please you go ahead."

I shooed away the flies, and retreated with my meal to the very corner of the saloon table, in the hope of some privacy....to no avail, my two visitors craned to watch from the companionway, two pairs of intense brown eyes, intent on deriving as much entertainment from this alien being as they might.

The bread was nicely crusty, la langouste au mayonnaise delicieuse. My cheap wine complemented the repast perfectly. I was truly hungry...during several days of just plain Maggi Mee I had been eating very little. But in truth the potential pleasure was sorely diminished...I was eating well in front of very poor people who had never experienced gourmet food as we know it.

Surely there must be some delicacy...no food...but drinks! I rummaged in the freezer to find a beer and a Coca Cola...surely the world's most famous drink would appeal to a child? I offered them to my visitors. They gravely accepted them, showing an initial shock at the iciness of the cans, changing finger tips as the cold bit into them. They both inspected the cans minutely, both right side up and upside down, and then looked at me expectantly.

Was it conceivable that they had never seen canned drinks before, especially ice-cold ones? I gently took the Coke from the girl's hands, spelled out the name with a finger,

explained that “Coca Cola” is especially for children, and that “Beer” is for grown men. I opened the pull-top of the Coke in plain view, and poured the contents into a glass. She took it from me, peered closely into the evil purple fluid, and raised the glass to peer at the bubbles.

Her father needed no further prompting. After some fiddling with the top, his large steady hands managed to open the can with a...phht!...that startled him. With great concentration he poured the wondrous amber nectar, raising a white collar of foam nonetheless.

He looked enquiringly at me. “Bir...obat?” (Beer is medicine, right?).

“Ya, obat!” I agreed.

The man took a deep draught, a white moustache vivid on his dark skin, and then suffered a prolonged, involuntary spasm that afflicted his entire upper body. He then sucked a great breath in through his clenched teeth, and finally released a great sigh. A wide, gap-toothed smile and a raised thumb registered approval.

Emboldened, the little girl took a hesitant sip, then suffered the same spasm and intake of breath, followed by a radiant smile of sparkling, regular teeth and huge brown eyes for my benefit. In delight at such an outpouring of simple pleasure at a new taste experience, I left my half-eaten meal to the flies.

The party livened up. The girl uttered a long bubbling sentence to her father in their own dialect. The father replied and a voluble conversation continued. They then took second draughts from their glasses, and repeated the involuntary shudders. The unexpected cold and the carbonic bubbles were obviously new sensations. I retrieved my glass of wine from amidst a black cloud of flies, and rejoined the party.

But my guests were now inexplicably eager to leave. The father explained dramatically that his daughter wanted to take her half glass of Coke to the village for her friends to share before it should warm up!...and that he thought this a good idea and would treat his own friends to a taste of bir too.

I asked them to wait, and found deep in the freezer three more Cokes and two cans of Carlsberg, our entire remaining supplies. I knew Jaji would miss his Cokes, and I surely would regret my cheerful little green Charliebergers, but this was too good a chance to miss. I wrapped the five cans in newspaper to conserve the cold. My visitors examined the printed paper, both right side up and upside down, with great interest. Reassured of further supplies, they both eagerly drained their own drinks. They clambered down into their dugout, both of them with the practiced ease of people born in boats. I realized then that these must surely be Orang Laut, Men of the Sea.

I asked “Saudara bangsa apa?” (What nation are you, Brother?)

“Indonesia!” he proudly proclaimed.

Ahh yes, but “Suku apa?... (what tribe?) Bugis, Melayu, Orang Laut?”

“Ahh, ya, Orang Laut, Orang Senayang!” he announced, obviously pleased that I was interested.

“Selamat jalan!” (bon voyage!) I offered as they pulled away, the girl stroking as confidently with her paddle as her Dad. I watched them go, not disappointed that they did not wave or look back, because I knew that a common belief amongst seafarers of the Malay Archipelago holds that such ordinary behaviour is a bad omen for travel by sea.

We sailed away. I had enjoyed our encounter. I did make some notes about it. I see now the man’s name was Mohammed Satar, so even then these hitherto unspoiled people had “masuk Islam”, become nominal Muslims. I was later to regret not asking the child’s full name. I gave little further thought thereafter to the pleasant lunch I had shared with them.

Roughly ten years later we anchored Four Friends in the magnificent lagoon at uninhabited Pulau Bawah, in the Anambas Archipelago, some 120 nautical miles to the

Northwest of Tokong Kemudi, where I had met father and daughter for lunch so many forgotten years before..



Unusually, there was another craft anchored in the lagoon, a large cranky-looking, unpainted, wooden cargo boat of some sort, with a flotilla of dug-out canoes strung astern. After we had dropped anchor I saw one canoe put out towards us.

Schooner "Four Friends" (successor to the Ketch in the story) and an adult-sized Orang Laut dug-out in the lagoon at Pulau Bawah. This thirty years after the Memorable Lunch

As the tiny boat drew closer, I saw that its crew comprised two girls, or young women, gorgeously attired in colourful sarongs, with bare shoulders and bright red-painted lips. I was astonished, I had never seen behaviour like this in our conservative, largely Muslim part of the world. For a moment I wondered whether this was something entirely new, that the large vessel was some sort of floating pleasure-palace.

Ever gallant, I welcomed the two young ladies on board. One of them, a plump, rather plain girl, flashed a hesitant smile of brilliant teeth and large brown eyes at me. Once again I was surprised at such familiar, feminine behaviour.

I introduced my visitors to my charter-party guests, a group of divers from England. The women among them were eager to know more about the lives of the local girls. I translated their questions as best I could, adding my own background comments to help bridge the wide gap between these two disparate cultures.

I finally remembered my duties as a host, and fetched two cans of cold Seven-Up for the visitors. One, she of the big brown eyes, flashed a quizzical smile at me (again!) and asked, very shyly, "Ada minuman yang merah, ini biru?" (do you have the red drink, this one is blue?) I brought up a cold can of Coca Cola.

The girl beamed, and fumbled with the pull-top. Sympathetic English fingers helped. The girl sipped her drink...and then...erupted in that same great shiver and sharp intake of breath...that I suddenly remembered from that pleasant encounter many years before! "Tokong Kemudi!...sudah banyak lama!" (a long time ago!) I roared, and gestured theatrically at the girl. She rewarded me with an even wider grin, and a vigorous nod. Initially I felt a little tongue-tied, trying to remember if I should know her name, or maybe that of her father, but the girl responded with an extraordinary act. She crossed the gap between us, seized my right hand and bowed to kiss my hand. I was aware that this

was the behaviour of devout Malay daughters and nieces towards their older relatives...but the English women gaped in astonishment.

I seized on the English surprise to cover my lack of immediate and relevant things to say, in a foreign language, to my new friend, and so launched into a dramatic account in my native tongue of my earlier meeting with the girl and her father, illustrating my tale with copious gestures to include the girl, indicating her small stature of a decade previous, and reproducing the giant spasms of pleasure at the cold and the bubbles, stressing Coke for the child and “bir...obat!” for the father. As I wound up the tale with our chance meeting of the present, and the precise nature of the girl’s filial gesture, I saw at least one set of damp English eyes being furtively wiped.

Later I asked the girl about her father, was he on the big boat?...I had plenty of Bir if he were. I instantly regretted asking, for she bowed her head sorrowfully, “Bapak sudah mati!” she said, softly, (My father is dead already!) I asked how old was she now? “Tujuh belas tahun” (Seventeen years old) and we agreed together that she must have been about seven when we first met, making that lunch together a whole decade previous! I asked her name, “Saya Nur!” (I am Nur) she proclaimed, touching her heart with her right hand in that very touching Malay gesture.

I was immensely proud that the two girls could feel that it was safe, and appropriate, for them to come visiting alone...and surely their male relatives on the other boat had approved....even husbands, I asked?...”Belum kawinan!”, (not married yet). I was proud too that my ship was sufficiently well known to be considered a benign presence in their waters.

That occasion ten years before turned out to be a memorable lunch indeed!

PS: Some four or five more years later Four Friends anchored briefly off Tokong Kemudi, the small island where I first met Nur and her father. A perahu with a large middle-aged matron as sole crew arrived alongside as mothership to a flotilla of tiny dugouts specifically made for, and now paddled by children...all proficient paddlers. They scrambled on board for the usual small gifts and some demanded “Obat!”, medicine, for a range of real and imagined maladies.

I remembered an occasion long ago, and asked whether “Nona Nur..” (Ms. Nur) was living on the island?

“Nurahliza atau Nuraini? (N...or N...?)” asked the matron.



Ahhh! I remembered only the short form, Nur. The matron, whose knees and arm are visible past my right shoulder in the photo below, then gestured at the smallest child among my visitors, and remarked, “Ini anak Nurahliza, namanya Fauziah” (this

is the child of Nurahliza, her name is Fauziah).

Fauziah, anak Nurahliza (the little girl, about 4, in a white dress, peering at the camera) certainly had inherited the same eyes! But try as I might to amuse her, little Fauziah remained quite shy, and I did not get to see if her teeth were brilliant white. I like to think she was the child of the girl I knew as Nur!

Of course I found enough ice-cold Cokes for them to share. Now I saw that times had changed. The older kids opened their cans effortlessly...Fauziah fumbled and had to be helped...and there were no ecstatic spasms of delight, only contented slurping. It was apparent that "Progress" had spread its tentacles at least as far as exposing this new generation to that ultimate icon of tasteless Globalization, iced Coca Cola.

85%

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