

**P**ETANI PARA Estate is still there. But the little settlement or kampung where the workers of the estate lived is no longer the idyllic and care-free place that it was in the 1950s and 60s. It has been re-arranged. It is in central Kedah between Bukit Selambau, where a by-election was held in April last year, and Sungai Lalang, a sleepy little town where there is a market, provision shops and restaurants.

In those days Sungai Lalang was where workers from nearby estates make quick visits for a nip or two of something stronger than toddy at a bar tucked away to the back of a provision shop. There was also a mahjong saloon where Chinese, Indians and Malays pushed and thumped the plastic tiles from the stacks in front of them. It was a crowded place around the seventh and twentieth of every month when all estates pay advances or salaries to their workers.

The town is on the old main road to Alor Star. About 5km to the north is Bedong where there is a hospital which serves the estates and about 7km to the south is Sungai Petani, the Kuala Muda district capital, with government offices, shops and banks. There was only one bank then, Hong Kong & Shanghai.

The two cinemas, Empire and Queens, have long since gone. In their glory days, they screened only Tamil films around the seventh and twentieth. Some Malay estate workers would also watch them while others went to the bangsawan shows that make their appearance on the same days. Chinese too would be in the audience of this local theatre.

The whole area was rubber country, albeit a happy rubber country and a true 1Malaysia community if ever there was one. The lingua franca was Kedah Malay spiced with many Hokkien and Tamil words. Many rubber estates have made way for housing and factories. Gone too are the tolerant, easy and carefree spirit of the early days.

I remember a year or so before Aug 31, 1957 when Malaya's Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was touring the country shouting "merdeka". He would be imitated by almost everyone who heard him on the radio. Some said "merdeka", some others "katrika" or "apa ka" but it was all articulated good-naturedly without malice and no one was offended.

The little settlement in Petani Para Estate, hemmed in by vast expanse of rubber trees, is about 2sq km and running across it is a large stream. On one side were the old labour lines referred to as *kuci atas* or upper *kuci* and on the other side, slightly downstream were the factory, the office, two smokehouses and the new labour lines or *kuci bawah*. Concealed slightly behind one smokehouse was a toddy shop.

Nobody seems to be able to explain satisfactorily what *kuci* actually means. Some say that it is derived from an Urdu word meaning an open space or compound and that it was brought into use here by British planters who had served in India.

Mostly Indians occupied the houses in *kuci atas* with some Malays of the *agama matahari* sect as their neighbours. Members of the sect who arrived later were housed in several blocks of houses in *kuci bawah* where the other



Queens Cinema used to screen Tamil movies on the seventh and twentieth of each month. – Image courtesy of Roger Marshallsay who lived in Sungai Petani, Cameron Highlands and Penang between 1953 and 1956.

# 1Happy rubber country

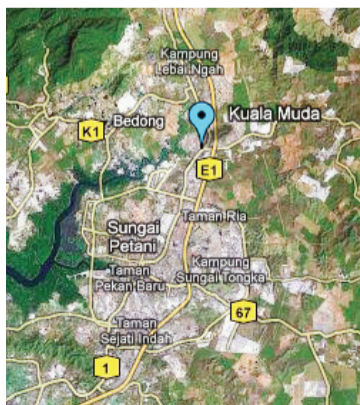
**ZAINON AHMAD** relives his childhood in an estate in Sungai Petani, when life was carefree and where racial harmony and tolerance came naturally.



Typical scenes of life in an estate school in the 50s and 60s in Malaya. – Images from Rubber Research Institute archives.



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Malays lived.

*Kuci atas* has three provision shops to cater to the workers. One was owned by Ellapen, one by Baba and the third by Majeed. Ellapen was more known to everyone as Ketam because he

used to peddle crabs from estate to estate before he started his shop. Baba's shop was the biggest and occupied the prime spot at the edge of *kuci atas*' square. One side served as a coffee shop, famous for its red bean pau, and bar and therefore attracted a lot of clientele in the

evening.

Baba who said he was born in Hongkong had three daughters – one later married an Indian, and the other two married Chinese businessmen – and a son Poh Kiew who is still my friend. He is a rich man now and lives in Sungai Petani.

Most young workers – Indians, Chinese and Malays – would frequent Baba's shop just to gawk at his girls. Those with money would go into the coffee shop to buy the pau so that they could get a closer look at the girls or exchange a few words or a smile.

Majeed's shop was the most organised. When the settlement was fenced up during the Emergency and food was rationed, Majeed was given the sole right to sell such controlled items as rice, sugar, canned milk and sardines.

He thrived and made little contributions to wedding

feasts or local *maulud* (Prophet Muhammad's birthday) celebrations or to the annual Hindu fire-walking event. When the estate management built a little surau, Majeed paid for the *kenduri* (feast) held at its opening.

As was to be expected those belonging to the *agama matahari* did not join the congregation. In everything else they were part of the Malay community and their children studied together with the children of the other Malays at the school housed in a former godown.

Several blocks of houses in *kuci bawah* were occupied by Chinese tappers and their families while a Chinese carpenter and his family lived in a house not far from them. The carpenter's son, Soon, was a close friend for a long time until he migrated to Australia.