




God's Patchwork Quilt:

The Peoples of South Sumatra



L.D. Waterman

Listening and unspoiled, Lake Ranau lies tucked into the southwestern corner of South Sumatra.¹ Seventy miles to the northwest, Mount Dempo soars a majestic 5876 feet above sea level, its verdant tapering slopes whispering the legacy of this dormant volcano.

Yet natural beauty is not the dominant impression on most who have been to this province of Indonesia. Its capital city, Palembang, has been sullied by oil refining, cement manufacture, and fertilizer production. The vast Musi River, flowing from the Bukit Barisan Mountains in the far west through Palembang and eastward to the sea, was once the pride of the ancient Sriwijaya civilization. It is now a murky flow of pollution, with plain wooden houses crowded along its banks. Slash-and-burn farming produces a thick, smoky haze that covers much of the province during each year's dry season – limiting visibility, closing airports, irritating eyes and lungs, and exasperating nations downwind of Sumatra.

Much of South Sumatra is isolated, with only minimal educational opportunities outside the cities, and almost non-existent medical care. Huge mangrove swamps stretch to the east and north of Palembang. To the west lie endless flat miles of tropical forest and plantations. Palembang itself has a reputation for crime, much more than most other Indonesian cities. There's a lot of talk of killing and theft. Spiritually sensitive observers say there's a violent feel to the city: a sense you always need to be on your toes.

Most people wouldn't choose to go to South Sumatra. When people from the outside do arrive there, residents are immediately curious why they have come. This eager curiosity can open the door for building relationships.

A Patchwork of Peoples

South Sumatra is a patchwork quilt of ethnic groups with many similarities among their diverse languages. Social and economic pressures are weakening ethnic identity among many smaller groups, and intermarriage between ethnic groups is on the increase, especially in Palembang. Yet enmity and suspicion persist between most groups.

The Palembang ethnic group has significant influence throughout the province. Other ethnicities tend to treat the Palembang with respect; perhaps because of their big-city status, or maybe because of their reputation as criminals.

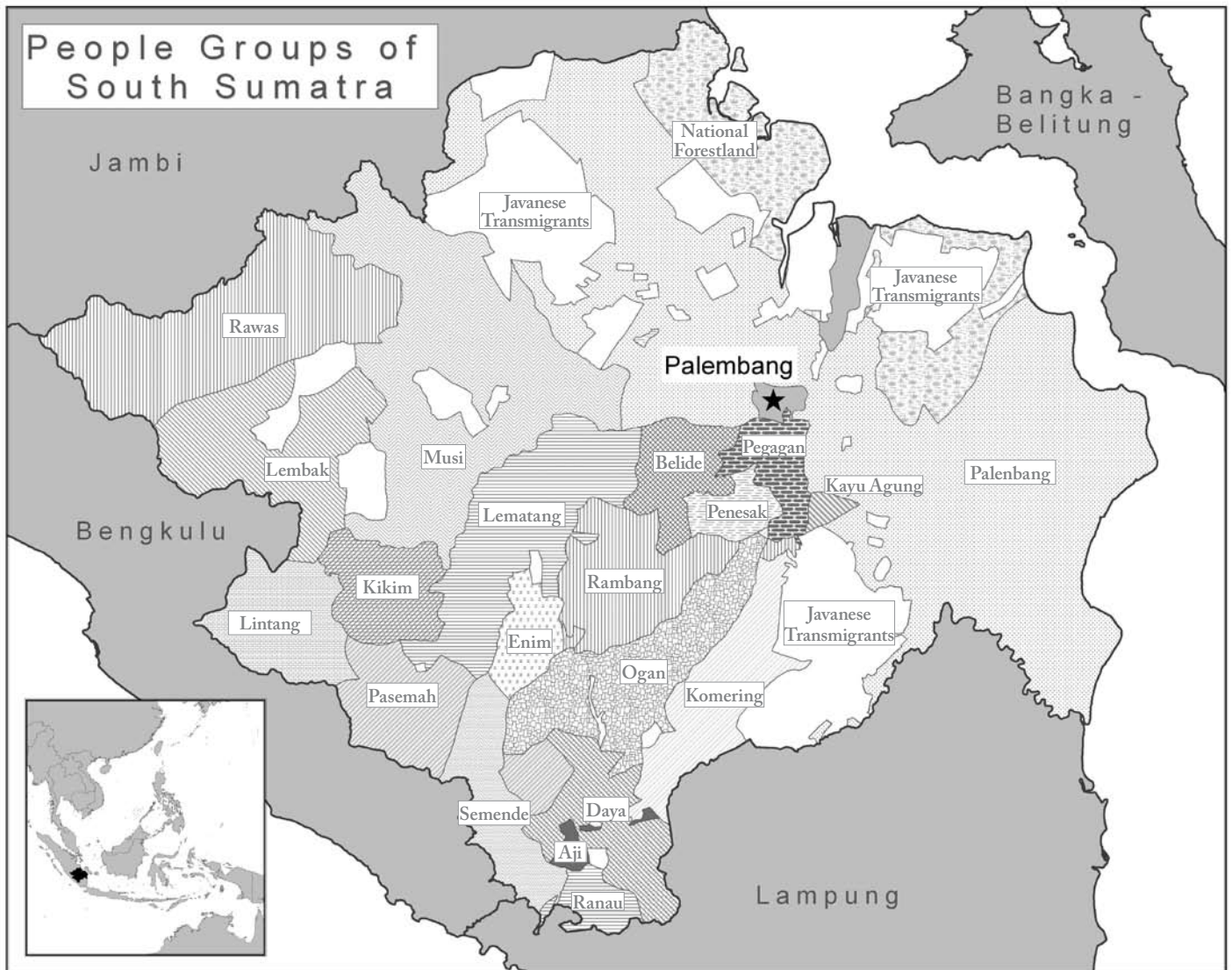
Village life meanders quietly, as do the countless rivers; and both social and spiritual activity generally revolve around the local mosque. Many villages of South Sumatra, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, are so isolated that people over 50 years of age have no awareness that the world holds any belief system other than their own syncretistic brand of Islam.

Palembang has seen significant development in recent years, but urban economic advance has not translated into increased openness toward other beliefs. The spiritual attitude of Palembang is generally more hard-line than in the rest of the province, where people struggle to survive amidst poverty. Increased income from oil, mining, and other industries goes mainly to those at the pinnacle of the economic hierarchy.

The indigenous peoples of South Sumatra are now joined by other groups which have migrated to the province. Most notable among these migrants are Chinese Indonesians (known for their business acumen), Bataks from North Sumatra, and Javanese transmigrants. Though the Javanese on the island of Java have numerous Christian churches, more than 99% of the Javanese in South Sumatra remain Muslim.

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Cluster	People Group	Population
Musi	Musi	600,000
	Palembang	1,600,000
	Lembak	83,000
Pasemah	Rawas	200,000
	Kikim	80,000
	Lematang	275,000
	Lintang	190,000
	Pasemah	330,000
	Semendo	230,000

Cluster	People Group	Population
Ogan	Belide	75,000
	Enim	100,000
	Ogan	150,000
	Rambang	140,000
	Aji	15,000
	Pegagan	225,000
	Penesak	130,000
Lampung	Komerling	450,000
	Ranau	17,000
	Daya	80,000
	Kayu Agung	20,000
Javanese Transmigrants		1,850,000

A huge social gap divides the local people and “outsiders.” Outsiders generally run the businesses, and a few elite government officials wield power. Most local people have little control over the currents that steer the course of their lives.

Despite these challenges, outsiders to the province often find that indigenous people are positive, friendly, helpful and very curious. Yet beneath the surface lies suspicion of outsiders – a suspicion which newcomers can overcome through building friendships. These friendships happen most naturally when one can become “adopted” into a family, a pattern which opens wide doors of social acceptance.

The “Giants” in South Sumatra

The unreached groups in this province remain 99-100% Muslim, and numerous obstacles face those who would like to bring the hope of the gospel to them. First is the poor quality of roads and communication by which to gain access to various groups.

Second is the remoteness of many ethnic groups, combined with resistance from provincial and local officials toward outsiders who might influence those under their control. Many government officials are aware that Christianity is a global faith, and they would prefer to maintain the status quo.

Third, the diversity of cultures and languages greatly multiplies the effort needed to see the gospel advance throughout the province. Most groups do not even have Scripture portions or stories in their heart language.

Another barrier is the crucial role of the *shamans*

(traditional healers and persons of spiritual power) and corrupt government officials, both of whom have a large stake in continuing activities contrary to the advance of the gospel. In addition, the relatively high crime rate is a deterrent to many who would consider working in South Sumatra.

At present, the Musi people group seems most closed to the gospel. No churches have been allowed among them, and accusations of “Christianization” (using manipulative means to trick people into converting to Christianity) have prevented significant gospel sowing among them.

Behind these visible challenges to God’s Kingdom lie the invisible powers and principalities entrenched within the soul of South Sumatra. The “Village Cleansing” ceremony, held annually in almost every village of South Sumatra, is scheduled and supervised by the local *shaman*. All the members of a village attend this ceremony, which involves blood sacrifice in the quest for village safety. The ceremony also involves prayer for a fruitful harvest, cleaning the graves of the ancestors, and honoring the spirits who guard the rivers, trees, and other places of power.

Twenty-six sites in the Pasemah highlands feature monolithic statues over 2000 years old, along with eerie tombs and terraced sanctuaries, evidencing long-entrenched spiritual strongholds. One statue features a snake wrapped around a person, while another shows a half-man-half-beast offering a human sacrifice. In the second, two people writhe in fear of their

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Partnerships That Work

Ministries in other parts of Indonesia have demonstrated that the most effective church planting among unreached groups here happens through partnership between expatriates and Indonesians from cultures similar to the focus culture. Each can supply a vital ingredient.

A few Indonesian groups already have a vision and passion for bringing Good News to the peoples of South Sumatra. They intend to obey God’s call by faith, with or without assistance from outside. They don’t look for a handout, or relationships of depen-

dency. But they note a valuable role that can be played by expatriates called to partner with them in proclaiming the Good News.

One field worker describes the partnership potential this way: “The national workers are like the sharp metal point of a spear, and the expatriates are like the long wooden shaft. Both have an essential role to play.” Others agree that partnerships like these show great potential for “finishing the task.” Westerners who come thinking they’re going to do it all themselves usually spend years spinning their wheels. Those who have the patience and humility to become learners and partners find Christ at work through the diversity of his multinational Body. 🌐

looming fate, one in the grip of each of the creature's lichen-encrusted hands.

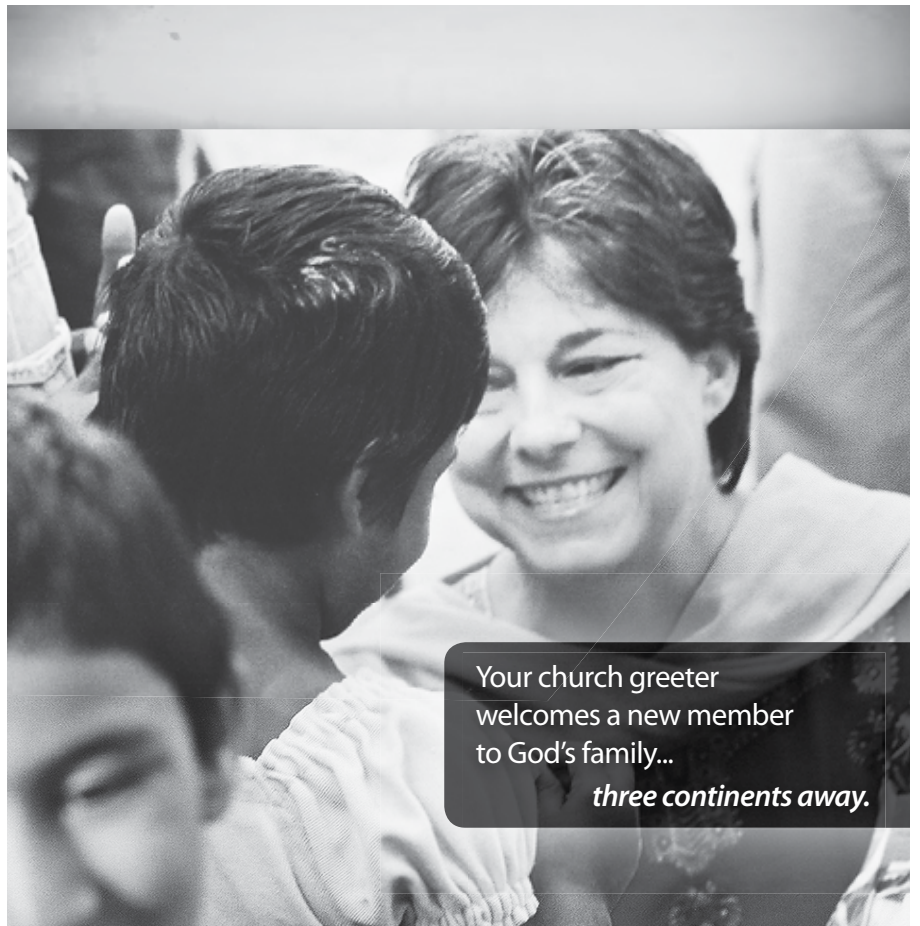
Local stories connect the strangely shaped megaliths to a legendary figure known as "Bitter Tongue." According to legend, he consulted with a *shaman* to overcome his opponents. The *shaman* gave him power that whatever he spoke was certain to happen, except to make dead things alive again. The legends say that he turned the Ogan King and others to stone, and cursed the people with five curses. One version recounts these curses as sickness, poverty, ignorance, empty religious ritual, and womanizing/divorce. Adults still recount to children the story of Bitter Tongue as a morality tale, and many of South Sumatra's indigenous people continue to believe the stories. The fruit of Bitter Tongue's curse remains with them up to the present. They need to know Him who has broken the curse, that they might have blessing and hope.

"The Black Hole of Missions"

Many "giants," both visible and invisible, oppress the land. As a result, few workers feel "called" to serve in this province. Of those who do come, few stay long. Disease, lack of infrastructure, family situations and depression are the visible causes, yet the "fingerprints" of spiritual opposition can often be discerned behind these. Almost no one who has gone to the province with Great Commission motives has lasted more than five years. According to Caleb*, a strategic observer, this part of Sumatra "is the black hole of missions. Anything that's put there just disappears. There's a lot of inertia for Sumatra to remain hopeless. It's going to require a strong force to change that. We need more prayer, workers and effort."

Some workers with a burden for the province live in distant cities like Jakarta, Bandung, or Singapore, but such residency creates the dual challenges of tiring travel and disconnectedness from much of what's happening on the field. So far, no person or group has effectively overcome the "giants" of South Sumatra.

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The concern about crime and the pervasive distrust in the province have a wearing effect on the human soul. Fear and superstition remain deeply rooted among the populace, and black magic is commonly practiced in certain areas. Fear of spirits and fear of death constantly haunt the souls of South Sumatra's people. They deeply need the Good News of the One who has overcome death, spirits and fear.

A Patchwork of Progress

Status. Most indigenous groups of South Sumatra have no known believers among them. A few groups have a mere handful of believers, and only one group has some small indigenous congregations.

Since the 1960s there has been sporadic outreach among the indigenous peoples, but it has involved only a few workers, and has mainly reached Indonesian immigrants in the area. More recently an increas-

ing number of concerned individuals are taking action, forming a network to focus on this province. A prayer network has been established, and prayer journeys have begun to penetrate the darkness.

At this point not many gospel workers actually live in the province. Relationships among those on-site are generally positive, yet one major strategic gap appears between those using traditional approaches (direct sharing followed by an immediate challenge to believe in Christ) and those using more contextual outreach.

Churches. Some churches do exist in South Sumatra, but almost all of their members are outsiders, from other Indonesian ethnic groups. Unfortunately, many of the "Christians" have a reputation for gambling, drunkenness, and lending money at exorbitant interest rates. Some groups hold noisy "religious" ceremonies more closely related to their own cultural traditions than the essence of the gospel.

For the most part, these churches keep busy with their own plans and activities, and have little or no interest in connecting in a meaningful way with the majority groups around them. They find it far more comfortable to stay separated and to avoid any action that might increase persecution (a legitimate fear in this environment). Recently, however, interest in praying for the indigenous majority has been growing among church members.

A challenge for new believers. With the exception of the Palembang people, most South Sumatrans are not well versed in Islam. Yet any steps to follow Christ generally meet with family rejection, for in a culture where belonging to a group is paramount, such initiative calls into question a person's core identity. Some believers have been able to reconnect later with their families, especially when grandchildren arrive. Also, a few individuals have come to faith in Christ outside the province, but most have no desire to return for the sake of reaching their own people.

Needs and Opportunities in South Sumatra

South Sumatra has an abundance of *social needs*. Among them are job opportunities, marketable work skills, health education, water purification, and improved farming technologies to increase rice production. Many people have a strongly felt need for education, especially in English and in computers and other technical fields. They also need small businesses, along with economic development that could bring hope. The provincial government has launched significant economic development, especially in the Palembang area, but this push for development does not always translate into conditions conducive to major foreign investment.

Among *spiritually related needs* are translation of

Prayer Points

- ☞ Pray for Palembang, a city gripped by crime and violence.
- ☞ Pray for the Musi people, who presently seem most closed to gospel witness.
- ☞ Pray for God to free the peoples of South Sumatra from the grip of invisible powers and principalities that they might hear and receive the Good News of the One who has overcome death, spirits and fear. Pray for the peoples of South Sumatra to know Him who has broken the curse, that they might have blessing and hope.
- ☞ Pray that concern for the indigenous majority will continue to grow among church members in South Sumatra.
- ☞ Pray for many Indonesian workers to be recruited, empowered, and sent out with training in contextual ministry and strong work platforms.
- ☞ Pray that God will bring workers who are willing to learn, able to build partnerships, and hardy enough to endure the challenges of this province.
- ☞ Pray that we will "see the smoke of God's glory in this place."
- ☞ Ask God how He would have you involved in reaching South Sumatra – through praying, giving, and/or going.

Scripture, discipleship of new believers, leadership training of mature believers, and radio broadcasting as a means of seed-sowing and discipleship. Mobilization of existing Indonesian churches and believers holds significant promise, since their cultural similarity will be a boon in their relationship with both the people and the environment.

South Sumatra also holds *many opportunities*, for those who would take hold of them. An increasing number of Indonesian believers have a vision for contextual ministry, and some groups have begun praying and considering how to partner together so that God's blessing will come to South Sumatra. These individuals and groups would be greatly encouraged by the assistance of those the Lord calls from other parts of the world. Earnest, well-informed prayer can push back the giants and open the way for God's glory to enter. Strategic partnership and giving could advance the work already in process. The need remains for creative, hardy laborers, from many parts of the world.

Those called to move to South Sumatra need viable, self-sustaining work platforms. Creating and developing these platforms would be a very strategic ministry for others within the Body, and could diminish dependence on outside funding.

Overall, the greatest need is for all kinds of "hope-bearers" – truly qualified professionals who desire to empower and bless the local people. Indonesian partners from outside the province can play a vital part in accomplishing this goal. Timothy*, a former seminary professor born in South Sumatra, says, "The most important thing we can do is to recruit national workers, empower them, and send



them out with training in contextual ministry and strong work platforms."

Three shortages plague the Lord's work in South Sumatra: a shortage of workers, a shortage of literature, and a shortage of funds. All three of these constitute an opportunity and a challenge for the global church.

Reaching South Sumatra

Reuben*, who has spent significant time in the province, says, "People [in South Sumatra] are open to God and his kingdom if they are not presented in traditional [Christian] ways. People will almost always receive prayer and therefore have an opportunity to experience God's power."

South Sumatra needs a breakthrough. Reuben asserts, "I believe that breakthrough has to come through prayer and going." Surely the Lord of the harvest is now calling many to pray for South Sumatra and some to go there. We need workers who are both humble and hardy – willing to learn and build partnerships, and able to endure the challenges of this province. Isaiah wrote, "Let them give glory to the LORD and proclaim his praise in the islands" (Is 42:12). Surely the time has come for God's people to make his glory known among the many peoples of the world's sixth-largest island!

As I talked with Arif* about his life and work in the province, his recurrent rasping cough frequently interrupted his comments. Finally I asked if he'd like a drink of water, and he replied, "No thanks. It's because of the smoke. It reminds me that later we'll see the smoke of God's glory in this place."

South Sumatra waits: a frayed patchwork of peoples desperately in need of hope. Who will make God's glory known here? Who will bring light to this land shrouded in darkness? 🌐

* All names are pseudonyms.

¹ The province of South Sumatra is, strangely enough, not Sumatra's southernmost province. It lies just north of the province of Lampung, which covers the southern tip of Sumatra, the world's sixth-largest island.

More Information and Steps to Service

in South Sumatra

- ✉ Direct inquiries to SumSel@pobox.com, the "Beautiful Feet Network" at beautifulfeet@missionspartnership.org, or Pioneers at info@pioneers.org.
- ✉ Write to SumSel@pobox.com to receive a 30-day prayer guide and to register for an electronic newsletter.
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