

# MALAYSIA

A PICTORIAL HISTORY 1400–2004

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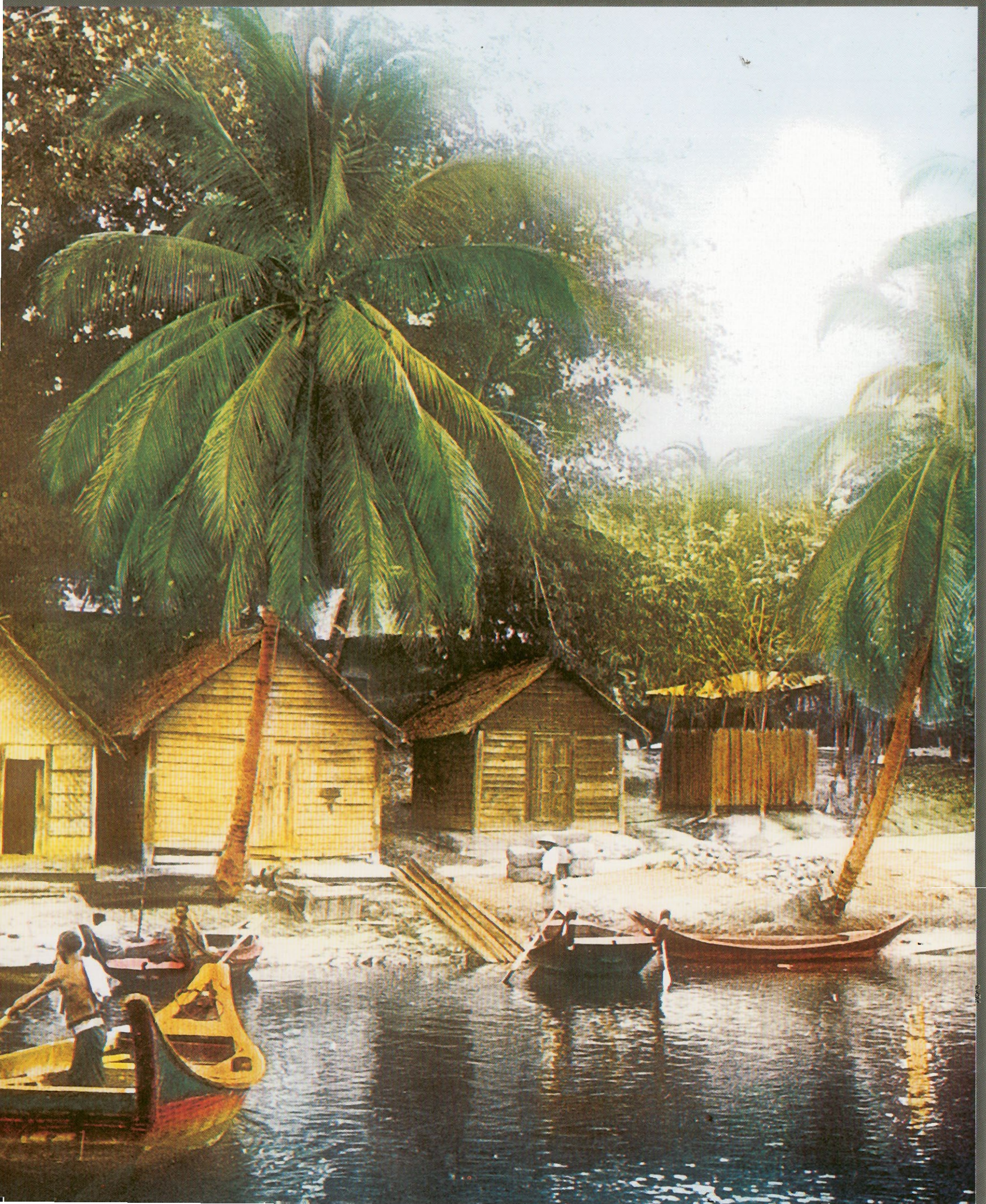
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# THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

It is said that there are at least two sides to every story. But what about a picture? Many would agree that 'a picture is worth a thousand words', and with Lewis Carroll's heroine, Alice, who asked: 'What is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?' in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Alice would have loved this book, for there are pictures in abundance—over 1,000—spanning the last 600 years of Malaysia's history. The pictures are mainly in the form of photographs—from the oldest-known prints made from glass negatives to the filmless wonders of digital cameras—and include sketches, lithographs, etchings, aquatints and watercolours. They also tell the story of photography: how it began with a few professionals who were engaged by the well-to-do, and eventually evolved into one of the world's most popular hobbies. Every picture tells its own story, and every viewer sees something different.

It has been said that the past is a foreign country. And indeed, viewing a historical photograph transports us back in time. We wonder about the identity of the sitters, what their thoughts, emotions, desires and fears were; we observe how the fashions have changed in clothes and hairstyles. We marvel at how the skylines and architecture of towns and cities have changed with time. For instance, a panorama of Kuala Lumpur in the 1880s shows a village of thatched roof shanties, while Taiping in the same era had buildings with splendid architecture. Only 20 years later, however, Kuala Lumpur was a grand Moorish-style capital while Taiping had gone into picturesque decline—its early architecture is still recognisable today. Other photographs show the continuity or otherwise of culture: the traditional Malay dress of a century ago has survived with few alterations. However the be-robed, queue-wearing Chinese gentleman has little fashion in common with his Westernised descendants.

Often, pictures convey a sense of history more evocatively than words. Photographs of grand colonial mansions and their smartly-dressed inhabitants compared to those of early Malayan houses and their poorly clad dwellers reveal the gap that existed between the rich and the poor, and between the different races. The need for a nation to gain independence is perhaps more easily portrayed in photographs than through words.

However, a history in pictures has its limitations and its bias, created by the painter or photographer. Before the invention of photography in 1839, artists could easily eliminate whatever they did not want in their sketch or watercolour. Other elements could be improved upon or even invented. This process was streamlined even further when the original sketch or watercolour was transferred to a form acceptable for printing, such as lithography. It would seem imagination had a more important role than factual representation in the very first images of Malaysia, for the fanciful renderings of Melaka at that time contained details of landscape and town views that allowed the viewer to easily imagine what it was like to live in that ancient port.

With photography, the photographer's control over what appeared in his picture was achieved through the use of different camera angles, although he would have been limited by his equipment. In the earliest photographs from the 1860s, streets appeared deserted, but this was the result of the long exposure times needed—any moving objects either appeared blurred or became invisible in photographs. Then there was the choice of subject. Early photographers usually worked on a commercial basis and therefore chose their sitters and subjects according to what they felt would sell, hence the predominance of Europeans, colonial buildings, picturesque views and posed natives in traditional dress. The exception was the ruling class, the Malay Sultans and their families, who were immortalised in all their



ABOVE Chinese goldminers, Bau, Sarawak, late 19th century.  
FACING PAGE Malay village in coconut grove, 1920s (ANM)